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GEORGE SEFERIS:

'Thrush'

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A

The House Near the Sea

The houses that I had they took from me. It happened
that the years were bad; wars ruin exiles;
sometimes the hunter finds the migratory birds
sometimes he does not find them. Hunting
was good in my time, many felt the pellet;
the others turn and turn or go mad in the shelters.

Do not speak to me of the nightingale
nor of the lark nor of the little wagtail
who writes figures with his tail in the light;
I do not know much about houses
I know they have their character, nothing else.
New at first, like babies
who play in gardens with the tassels of the sun,
they embroider colored shutters and doors
shining upon the day.

When the architect has finished, they change,
they frown or smile or even grow stubborn
with those who remained, with those who went away
with others who would return if they but could
or others who vanished, now that the world
has become a limitless hotel.

I do not know much about houses,
I remember their joy and their sorrow
sometimes, when I pause;
and again
sometimes, near the sea, in naked rooms
with a single iron bed and nothing of my own
watching the evening spider, I reflect
that someone is getting ready to come, that they adorn him
with white and black robes, with many-colored jewels,
and around him the quiet talk of venerable ladies—
grey hair and dark lace shawls—
that he is getting ready to come, and say goodbye to me;
or that a woman, eyelashes curled, deep-girdled,
returning from southern harbors,
Smyrna Rhodes Syracuse Alexandria,
from cities closed like shutters in the heat,
with perfume of golden fruit and herbs,
climbs the stairs without noticing
those who sleep beneath the stairs.

You know, houses grow stubborn easily when you strip them naked.

B

Sensual Elpenor

I saw him yesterday standing by the door
below my window; it was about
seven o'clock; a woman was with him.
He had the look of Elpenor just before he fell
and smashed himself, and yet he was not drunk.
He was speaking rapidly, and she
was looking absent-mindedly towards the gramophones;
now and then she cut him short to say a word

and then would glance impatiently
towards where they were frying fish, like a cat.
He whispered with a dead cigarette-butt in his lips:

—"Listen also to this. In the moonlight
the statues sometimes bend like reeds
amidst living fruit—the statues;
and the flame becomes a cool oleander,
the flame that burns man, I mean."

—"It is just the light . . . shadows of the night."

—"The night perhaps which opened, a blue pomegranate,
dark breast, and filled you with stars,
splitting time.
And yet the statues
bend sometimes, dividing desire in two,
like a peach; and the flame
becomes a kiss on the limbs, a sobbing,
and then a cool leaf carried by the wind;
they bend; they become light with a human weight.
You do not forget it."

—"The statues are in the museum."

—"No, they pursue you, why can't you see it?
I mean to say, with their broken limbs,
with a form from another time, a form you do not recognize
and yet know.
As when
in the last years of youth you love
a woman who remained beautiful, and you fear always,
while you hold her naked in the noon,
the memory that awakens in your embrace;
you fear lest the kiss might still betray you
to other beds now of the past
which nonetheless might haunt you
so easily, so easily, and bring to life
images in the mirror, bodies once alive:
their sensuality.

As when
returning from foreign lands you chance to open
an old trunk locked up a long time
and find the tatters of clothes you used to wear
in lovely hours, at festivals with lights
of many colors, mirrored, now becoming dim,
and there remains only the perfume of the absence
of a young form.
Truly, those statues are not
the fragments. You yourself are the relic;
they pursue you with a strange virginity
at home, at the office, at receptions for the celebrated,
in the unconfessed terror of sleep;
they speak of circumstances that you wish did not exist
or would exist years after your death,
and this is difficult because . . ."

—"The statues are in the museum.
Good night."

—". . . because the statues are no longer fragments.
We are. The statues bend lightly . . . Good night."

Here they separated. He took
the upgrade that leads towards the north
and she went on towards the light-flooded beach
where the wave is crowned in the radio's din:

The Radio

"Sails puffed out by the wind
alone divert the mind.
Perfume of silence and pine
will soon be an anodyne
for the sailor's parting wish,
flycatcher, wagtail, and catfish.
O woman whose touch is dumb,
hear the wind's requiem.

Drained is the golden keg
the sun has become a rag

round a middle-aged spinster's neck—
she coughs, and the cough comes back;
for the summer that's gone she sighs,
for the gold on her shoulders, her thighs.

O woman, O sightless thing,
hear the blindman sing.

Close the shutters: daylight recedes;
make flutes from yesterday's reeds
and don't open, knock how they may:
they shout, but they've nothing to say.
Take cyclamen, needles of pine,
lilies, anemones out of the brine.
O woman whose wits are lost,
hear the water's ghost.

Athens. The public has heard
the news with alarm; it is feared
a crisis is near. The prime-
minister spoke: "There is no more time. . ."
Take cyclamen . . . needles of pine . . .
O woman . . .
— . . . is crushingly stronger
The war . . ."

SOULMONGER

C

The Wreck "Thrush"

"This wood which cooled my forehead
at times when the noon burned my veins
in foreign hands will flower. Take it, I give it to you;
look, it is wood from a lemon tree . . ."
I heard the voice
as I was looking at the sea trying to distinguish
a ship which they had sunk there years ago;
they called it "Thrush"—a small wreck; the masts,
broken, undulate at odd angles in the depths, like tentacles,

or the memory of dreams, pointing out the hull:
vague mouth of some huge dead sea-monster
extinguished in the water. Calm spread all around.

And other voices slowly followed
in their turn; whispers thin and thirsty
emerging from the other side of the sun, the dark side;
one would say they sought a drop of blood to drink;
familiar voices, but I could not make them out.
And the voice of the old man came; this one I felt
falling to the heart of day,
calm, as though motionless:
"And if you condemn me to drink poison, I thank you.
Your law shall be my law; how can I go
wandering about in foreign lands, a rolling stone.
I prefer death.
Only God knows which of us will prosper."

Lands of the sun and you cannot face the sun.
Lands of man and you cannot face man.

The Light

As the years pass
the judges who condemn you multiply;
as the years pass and you talk with fewer voices,
you see the sun with other eyes.
You know that those who remained were deceiving you
the delirium of flesh, the lovely dance
that ends in nakedness.
As when, turning at night in the empty highway,
you suddenly see the eyes of an animal shine,
eyes already gone: thus you feel your own eyes;
you gaze at the sun: then you are lost in the dark.
The doric chiton
that your fingers touched and it swayed like the mountains,
is a marble figure in the light, but its head is in the dark.
And those who left the palestra to take their bows
and struck the willing marathon runner
and he saw the track sailing in blood,
the world empty like the moon,

the gardens of victory wither;
you see them in the sun, behind the sun.
And the boys who dive from the bow-sprits
go like spindles twisting still,
naked bodies plunging into black light
with a coin between the teeth, swimming still,
while the sun with golden needles sews
sails and wet wood and colors of the sea;
and still the white lekythoi
go down slanting
towards stones of the deep.

Light angelic and black,
laughter of waves on the sea's highway,
tear-stained laughter,
the aged suppliant sees you,
as he moves to cross the invisible slabs,
mirrored in his blood,
the blood which gave birth to Eteocles and Polynices.
Day angelic and black;
the brackish taste of woman that poisons the prisoner
emerges from the wave a cool branch adorned with drops.
Sing little Antigone, sing, O sing . . .
I do not speak to you of things past, I speak of love;
trim your hair with the sun's thorns,
dark girl.
The heart of the Scorpion has set,
the tyrant within man has fled,
and all the daughters of the sea, Nereids, Graeae,
run to the radiance of the emerging one;
whoever has never loved shall love,
in the light;
and you find yourself
in a large house with many windows open
running from room to room, not knowing from where to look out first,
because the pine-trees will vanish, and the mirrored mountains, and the
chirping birds
the sea will drain dry, shattered glass, from north and south
your eyes will empty of the light of day—
how suddenly and all together the cicadas cease.

ELLEN CURRIE:

On the Mountain Stands a Lady

Until the year that I met Mrs. Kevin-Spending, the obligation to grow into a woman lay light on me. Nothing *else* did, though. I spent that winter bivouacked at my cousin Teddy's house, dayhopping with her to her school, Dowd Academy. My father was dead and my mother was living in a hotel in Philadelphia. My cousin Teddy, whose bedroom I shared, prayed every night that I wouldn't be there in the morning. I prayed too, but neither of us had any luck at it.

In those days I was out-of-pleat on several levels. Teddy, on the other hand, was beautiful beyond the sophomore class's sternest need, and well organized. She won accolades on the hockey field. I, benched in some distant outskirt, feigned earache or a terrible cold. She was chosen to be Phaedra on Parents' Day. I lurked at the bottom of our French class, my mind a damp stain spreading to my mother, who had a job painting mottoes on ash trays and in her free time propelled toward matrimony a rich and cagey florist.

I despised Dowd Academy. The sky over it, the ground under it, its student body and its personnel oppressed me. I felt jailed. My old school, The Villa Maria, had been life as I had led it since my father died. Dowd Academy, in its ominous way, began to be Life.

The evenings, back at Teddy's house, were no improvement, since every night a boy named Douglas Lambert came to call. Teddy took him out on the sunporch, to the record player and *The Prophet.* I sat in the living room, brooding, more or less, and listening to my chubby Aunt Electra, who is a talkative enthusiast of potted plants. Outside of the window, in a golden cone of light, was high reality. From under a string of varnished gourds shone Dougie's profile, fierce against the cushions of the glider. My cousin Teddy was beside him, breasty and brainy and smug as a cat. Her hair was the color of marmalade. With one thing and another, it was a cold, dark winter.

Then, about the time that winter began to be spring, a new French teacher came to Dowd Academy. She was Mrs. Kevin-Spending. I knew her at once as an emissary from the wide, illuminated world.

Mrs. Kevin-Spending was, first of all, non-Dowd. She had water-green eyes and a breathy, wicked voice. She appeared to be alight with a mild, pleasurable fever. From the tags of information that she flung at us like coins, it was easy to determine that her clothes had come from Paris. Her husband was a cousin of the Queen.

Mrs. Kevin-Spending had a bit of a grudge against daylight. As soon as she entered a classroom, she pulled down the shades. She was something to see in that artificial twilight. Sometimes she was antic, sometimes she was calm. Sometimes, between the Vowel Chart and the framed Procedure for Fire Drill, she was beset by a peculiar urgency, as though she were delivering a message in a complicated code. Sometimes she was a holy terror. Where Miss Fogarty had merely made it clear that you would never learn French, Mrs. Kevin-Spending fluffed her gamin-cut, violet-washed hair, checked the moorings of a few of the things that floated or dangled from her, and added, relevantly, or with a merry, vagrant malice, that you were too tall, too short, too fat, too thin, pimpled, plain, much too smart or far from smart enough.

Dowd Academy was dazzled. I was dazzled too, but I was also full of reverence. Mrs. Kevin-Spending scared the hell out of me, but I loved her in the hollow of my nervous heart. She was gorgeous. She was hope. Her abundance and disorder caught me, and I saw in them the vistas of grown-upness. Not the measly local product, but a rich estate where people spoke French without trying, and had never heard of hockey, and where there were sunporches for all.

Of course I didn't get through to her. In a medium-long history of attempts, I had so far gotten through to exactly nobody. But Teddy was better at that. One day in class Mrs. Kevin-Spending told Teddy that she had *le regard de Vénus,* or something—a reference to her gilt-rayed, slightly mismatched eyes. Afterwards she confronted us in the library, scribbled her address on a call slip, and told us to come and see her that evening. She said to bring our French books. I was overcome.

The lobby of Mrs. Kevin-Spending's apartment building was Moorish and spooky, dimly lighted by yellow lanterns and hung with oval mirrors of a wild and desolate blue. It was dirty, and it smelled like a tunnel. Without knowing quite what to make of it, we started up the stairs. We passed a stained-glass window that opened on an air shaft and a black arrow, stencilled importunately on the wall and captioned DENTIST. Mrs. Kevin-Spending's door, unlabeled, was

next to one marked CLEMENT FRISCHWASSER DDS RING BELL WALK IN.

Teddy knocked. Mrs. Kevin-Spending instantly opened the door, stepped outside and closed it. Her velvet pajamas were a nervy shade of green. She was spangled and spattered with mirror chips, but she didn't look glad to see us. She just stood there. Teddy handed her a rose. She took it, smiled rather deafly, and slipped a hand inside her bodice to finger after a lost shoulder strap. Then she pushed open the door, waving us over the threshold.

"Don't step on the rug," she said.

Teddy stopped short and the procession piled up, especially me.

"That," Mrs. Kevin-Spending said. She pointed to a scrap of figured carpet that lay inside the door. "Step *over* it, can't you, it's not for walking on."

We made our way cautiously through a hall and into a room whose walls were a dingy, grotto blue. It was over-full of formidable black oak furniture, including a piano and a great big bed. The bed was droopily canopied in tired pink taffeta and looked, like everything else in the room, forlorn, as though it had been left over at the end of an auction. I was beginning to feel pretty bad.

"Sit down," Mrs. Kevin-Spending said peevishly. "Don't mill around. Young people mill *around* so. It makes my nerves shoot out."

Teddy sat down on the outermost edge of a boudoir chair. Mrs. Kevin-Spending tilted a lamp so that it bathed her in a vicious glare.

"Sit, Isolde," she said to me, "sit, sit. You never do a thing you're told and that's your entire trouble."

I looked around for something to sit on. Some dining room chairs were ranged against the walls, but all sorts of things were on them and under them. I was paralyzed. For some reason, what bothered me most of all was the faint impropriety of being unexpectedly entertained in a room with a bed in it. Mrs. Kevin-Spending was watching me with blood in her eye. I cleared off one of the chairs and lugged it out to the island of space near the bed. She smiled at me and hooked another lamp into a swarm of extension cords. It came suddenly abloom and shone full on her, and the paint around her eyes and on her mouth looked, for an instant, like a second, makeshift face scrawled teasingly across the first. It gave me the creeps. She set the lamp down beside me.

"Is that enough light on the subject?" she said briskly.

We assured her that it was. She began to circle me, gathering up art objects and relocating them out of elbow range. I didn't blame her for a minute, but I wished I could get her, in my mind's eye, back to her own, her original face.

Suddenly Teddy took an unexpected breath. "Do you *live* here?" she said, appalling me.

"What an unearthly question," Mrs. Kevin-Spending said, stopped in her tracks. "Of course I live here. Where would I live if I didn't live here?"

"Well *I* don't know," Teddy said. "Miss Lieblich and Miss Fogarty used to have an apartment, but on weekends they went home or somewhere, so Miss Lieblich and Miss Fogarty really lived in houses."

"Did they?" Mrs. Kevin-Spending said. "Well, the Eskimos live in igloos and the boy scouts live in tents but what that means to me I just don't know." She looked us over soberly and sat down on the foot of the bed. A newspaper lay beside her and she flicked it with her fingernail. "Jack Astor's getting fat as a pig," she said.

She smiled at us and we smiled back. The little assembly took on an unpremeditated and provisional tone, as though it had evolved by accident, maybe in a slowly down-going elevator. After awhile Mrs. Kevin-Spending fished a tangle of knitting from under a cushion. "Did I knit or did I purl?" she said musingly, holding it aloft. "I purled." She worked several rows in silence. Teddy, who has never cared for the company of people who aren't making some kind of noise, sneezed nervously. Nobody blessed her. It was very very quiet. I unfolded my hands and hung them down the side of my chair, to dry. *Principes de Grammaire et de Style* went coasting off my lap. I very casually rested my foot on it.

"I was wondering what we were going to do tonight," I said, driven.

Mrs. Kevin-Spending stopped knitting. "We're going to sit quietly and express ourselves in short declarative sentences," said she. She began knitting again. Before long it was quieter than ever.

"French sentences?" I said finally, full of foreboding.

Mrs. Kevin-Spending gave me a look. It was a short look, but it was meaty. Vanquished, I stared at my saddle-shod feet. My left foot was a whole size larger than my right foot, and even my right foot seemed quite a bit larger than it strictly needed to be. I wanted to go home.

"I was never like that," Mrs. Kevin-Spending said fastidiously.

"I was as much like Thérèse as I was like anyone. Though of course I wasn't blonde. Blonde hair is unfortunate in the long view. It has a way of getting dismal."

Teddy crossed her eyes at Mrs. Kevin-Spending. I disapproved, but it was so precise that a little thud of joy moved between my collarbones. "I guess we're waiting for somebody," Teddy said on half a yawn. "I mean are we, or what?"

"We're waiting for Heather Lowenstein, who snuffs," Mrs. Kevin-Spending said ill-naturedly. She gave an illustrative snuff, not at all in Heather's manner. "Don't pretend you haven't noticed. And your chitchatty friend with the sunlamp. *Ing*rid. Late to class every single session and I know it's deliberate, but that's all right. She'll have a hide like an elephant before she's thirty." She pulled at a thread of beading at her cuff, breaking it and catching the glass beads in her palm. "We're waiting for that red-headed girl with the coat with the fur buttons," she said bitterly. "She's a very *sweet* girl, but she's got warts on her hands." She looked anxiously at her own hands. They were pale and profoundly wartless. "I'm trying to give you certain advantages. And I have to keep the group wieldy. You'll admit that Dowd is rather bare of advantages?"

I was ready to admit it. Teddy wasn't, though. "You have some beautiful pieces," she said calmly. "I can see why you wouldn't want to store them." She was looking at the bed.

"You say the most aggravating things! Pieces of what? Pieces of cheese?" Mrs. Kevin-Spending stood up, plucking delicately at the seat of her velvet pants. "Take your big foot off that book," she said to me. I did so. "Study your Irregular Futures," she said, sounding bored. She started for the kitchenette. "I had a magnificent credenza at one time, if that's what you mean," she said, not looking back. "Crotch mahogany, whatever that is." I picked up my French book and opened it. Teddy was trying to catch my eye and I, with my neck getting hot, was trying to prevent her. Mrs. Kevin-Spending was back in a flash.

"What's *that?*" she demanded. She was pointing with a stiff-fingered, outflung arm. The beads she'd had in her hand were skipping over the floor and Teddy and I were out of our chairs, scared. She wanted us to look at the lamp. We looked at it—hard. It was made out of a dented samovar and it had an ugly shade, brown panels with scenes cut out on them. It wasn't much of a lamp. After awhile we looked at *her*.

"The Left Bank!" she said triumphantly. "Do you see that?" Her gesture was tremendous. It introduced a blurry shawl flung over her piano.

"Pretty," Teddy said. "Our grandmother has one." She started to sit down, but Mrs. Kevin-Spending caught her arm above the elbow and detained her. With her other hand she took my wrist.

"Do you hear her?" she said to me. "Her grandmother! Doesn't she know where I got those? Paris! Her grandmother, no less."

"Well, actually she's both of our grandmothers," Teddy said huffily. She took a step backward, but Mrs. Kevin-Spending wouldn't let go.

"There was the darlingest side street, the darlingest shop," she said excitedly, "and I saw those and Valentine said, 'You *want* it? *Buy* it!' That's just the way he was—'You *want* it? *Buy* it!' I got those in Paris too." She steered us around to face a fretwork shelf. On it were a peeling gilt replica of the Eiffel Tower and a manikin pis. "You *want* it?" she said laughing, "*buy* it!" She let go of us and swung her arms, raising freedom and largess.

Teddy sat down. "I'm going to Paris," she said, shaking back a wing of her long blonde hair. "My grandmother's taking me."

Mrs. Kevin-Spending smiled. "All young girls think they'll get to Paris."

"I'm going. No gaff." Teddy gave her a steady look, right between the eyes.

"Is Isolde going too?"

"It's a different grandmother," I said aloofly. "I'm not going any place." I sat down again on my hard straight chair. The only place I even wanted to go was home, wherever that was. But Mrs. Kevin-Spending trotted over and gave me a friendly squeeze.

"Neither am I," she said. "But there's no reason why a schoolgirl and an elderly lady mightn't have a pleasant, educative little tour, I suppose." She put her hand on the back of my neck, under my heavy hair. I felt myself drawn into a conspiracy of superior perception.

"Bubbles isn't old," Teddy said. "She rockets around like nobody's business."

"Bubbles is old," I said, with Mrs. Kevin-Spending's arm around me. "Don't kid yourself. Bubbles is *plenty* old."

Mrs. Kevin-Spending patted me and went over to sit on the bed. "We bought such a lot," she said dreamily. "We had a house, the most marvelous house, so adorably furnished. And several Wallace

Nuttings that were heirlooms. And a vast green lawn with a Winston crabapple tree." She smiled at me. "Have you ever seen a Winston crabapple tree? You'd adore it."

Teddy crossed her legs. "Are we going to speak French, or what?"

"In due course or a little later," Mrs. Kevin-Spending said. "Don't anybody start till I'm ready."

"Was that in France, or where, that apple tree?" I said.

"In Horseheads," Mrs. Kevin-Spending said, with a heavy-lidded look of rapture. "Near Elmira."

"Horse *what?*" Teddy said.

"Horseheads. A very historical site. General Sullivan led his historic march from wherever it was to Dover, New Jersey, and on the way they camped at Horseheads. Well, in the middle of the night the Indians crept up and lopped off all the horses' heads. And that's how Horseheads got its name. A ghastly business, but there it is."

I said that Indians were a bunch of sneaks, but no one paid any attention.

"What do people do in a place like that?" Teddy said. "It sounds sort of bare of advantages to me."

Mrs. Kevin-Spending pulled off one of her earrings and held it so it sparkled in the scalding light. "They clean the sto-ove," she said crooningly. "They wake up in the morning and they say, 'This is the day the Lord hath made,' and more often than not they're right." She tossed the earring in the air and clapped her hands and caught it, like a little girl playing jacks. "They read books like *An Englishwoman's Love Letters,*" she added in an elevated tone. "You've never read that, I suppose."

"Well, who wrote it?" Teddy said gamely.

"An Englishwoman, I should imagine. Valentine was a writer himself. He wrote the most marvelous play about Old Spain. Every-time I think of that pavilion scene I cry." She found her earring and screwed it on again. "Valentine was a wonderful raconteur," she said happily. "I can't even tell a sad story, let alone a funny one, but he had people laughing all the time. He had a little blue book with just the last lines of amusing anecdotes written down in it. The *punch* lines. 'Women are angels without any wings,' he used to say, 'and yet they are very pec-u-li-ar things'—oh, he was witty. He was a terribly *vital* person."

"Somebody told me your husband taught hygiene in Poughkeepsie," Teddy said, pulling up her socks. She gave me a fractional

glance to see how I was taking that. I wasn't taking it very well. Neither was Mrs. Kevin-Spending.

"My second husband," she said, after a minute. "He comes here weekends, some weekends. He sleeps in the vestibule. Come on," she said moodily, "I'll show you."

She led us to the hall. Beneath a lavabo stuffed with rhododendron, bronzing, dusty, and tightly furled in death, stood a folding cot, its silvered handles left exposed by an old purple blanket. None of us got very close to it. Mrs. Kevin-Spending wanted to know if we needed more light. We said we didn't. She pressed the mattress with the tips of her fingers. The springs gave a sigh, as of sorrows bravely borne. It was cold and dark and smelled of Air-Wick in that hall and people were shrieking at each other in the next apartment.

"It looks very comfortable," Teddy said.

"Does it? It isn't," Mrs. Kevin-Spending said, wiping her hand on her pants. "Sterling."

We filed back into the other room. "Don't wiggle your hips, Teresa, it doesn't in the least become you," Mrs. Kevin-Spending said. "I'm going to make some cocoa now. The bathroom's that door there," she added meaningfully.

The bathroom was painted a searing pink and the fixtures were politely upholstered in chenille. Teddy checked her profile in the mirror and gave herself a couple of sharp slaps under the chin with the back of her hand. Then she looked promisingly in my direction. I was sitting on the edge of the tub, somberly regarding the bathmat, a fringy rectangle embroidered with the outlines of one very large and one very small bare foot.

"I suppose you like that?"

"I think it's darling," I said. "I think it's nifty." I thought it was awful.

"Well, *I* think it's *fey,*" Teddy said. Graciously waiting for the impact of her opinion to subside, she opened the medicine cabinet. Inside was an expensive chaos. Teddy found a chin strap and tied it on. She picked out a couple of gold-capped bottles and anointed herself with pale green paste.

"I'll give you a clue," I said. "Quit that."

"You know Mimi Schrott's sister?" Her diction was poor on account of the chin strap.

"No!" I said. A long-handled bath brush, worn and woefully

intimate, lay along the back rim of the tub. A bright blue douche bag was suspended from the shower ring. A ballerina in a glued-on tutu straddled a jar full of purple pellets that might have been for anything but certainly looked like worm cure.

"Mimi Schrott's sister goes to this very rotch school where her husband teaches."

"Whose husband?" I said ferociously. "*Whose* husband?"

"The Princess of Pure Delight's. And his name is Mr. Ziff."

"If I didn't know that I couldn't live through the night," I said. "Let's go home."

"*Ziff*. He has a tic." Teddy demonstrated, with an involved and graphic jiggle, the probable severity of Mr. Ziff's affliction. "*Horse*-heads," she said scornfully, "I never heard of anything so stinking middle class." She puffed out her cheeks and tapped lightly along her jaw. Upward, so as not to wreck her contours. "I like those crazy shoes, anyway. Those red heels are whorey."

"(A)," I said severely, "they are not. (B), the W is silent." I got up, rather regally, and left, banging my hipbone on the jamb of the door.

Mrs. Kevin-Spending had set a table with pastel paper napkins and squarish, painted china. When Teddy came out of the bathroom she brought cocoa and a plate of wet tan cake. Teddy reached for a piece and Mrs. Kevin-Spending stamped her foot. "Serve Isolde first," she said. "Don't be such an opportunist." It was miserable cake. Teddy plied me with it all evening.

"These are pretty dishes," Teddy said peaceably, watching me chew.

"Yes?" Mrs. Kevin-Spending said. "Well, just remember that they're Swiss and they mustn't get broken." She snatched a pillow from behind Teddy and settled on it on the floor, in a pose that made conversation and even swallowing very difficult.

"If my mother could see you sitting on the floor she'd take off like a big black bird," Teddy said.

"Your mother is a big bird," I said. "If you want to know."

Mrs. Kevin-Spending smiled approvingly up from the floor at me and whittled a finger. "Shame," she said, grinning.

"My mother's worse," I said overwroughtly. "She gets you in Wanamakers and asks you these questions about your sex life. She's got a Noguchi table, which is the crux, for all she knows."

"I wish we could start speaking French," Teddy said.

"Servez-vous de gateau," Mrs. Kevin-Spending said frugally. "It's gingerbread and it's delicious." She drew her knees up and put her arms around them. "I used to make marvelous cabbage rolls," she said sadly, "but Sterling says they're gassy. Which is absurd. Drink your chocolate and I'll tell you my dreams. The other night I dreamed a poem—'squatty little nightsheds, bearing down on sleep.' There was more but that's all I remember and I'm just as glad. Like 'I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me'—only worse." She extended her arms in front of her, bent her elbows parallel to the floor, grasped in each hand the opposite forearm and pushed. It was an execution familiar to both Teddy and myself. It was designed to modify, enlarge, or merely maintain the bosom. "I can just see them," she said, not stopping, "a hillside full of nightsheds, advancing like an army, with little pointed roofs. Nasty *things*. Nightsheds, whatever they are."

"Mimi Schrott's sister goes to Ferncliffe and she knows Mr. Ziff," Teddy said recklessly.

Mrs. Kevin-Spending dropped her arms. "Splendid," she said. She looked as though it were a long time since a piece of information of quite so little interest had come her way. "I could play the piano for you if I wanted," she said. "But I don't. Don't coax." She got up and went over to the piano. She spun the stool and sat down with her back to the keyboard. Her elbow struck a short complaining chord. "Middle C is jammed anyway," she said. "Anybody here play euchre? I thought not. I used to play euchre every night of my life. The knave of trumps is right bower. Valentine inevitably won." She ran her fingers through her fluffy silver hair. "Sterling is a hobbyist. He plays the oboe. He leaves these objects sitting around in glasses of water that look like I don't know what."

"Oh, reeds," Teddy said. "They're for the mouthpiece."

"I know what they are and I know what they're for and it doesn't console me. He also plays the cello and the classical guitar. He's learning Russian from phonograph records and he's an amateur palmist. And hi-fi. All he can talk about is how big somebody's baffle is." A sprinkling of the beads she'd dropped lay on the floor around her. She stepped on them, one by one, efficiently and almost with alarm. "Sterling has many admirable qualities," she said. She paused and reflected, seeming to be about to run through them, but apparently, just for the moment, they eluded her. "But little funny things. He has a sort of a declivity in his forehead. Not a *hole*. Nothing a stranger

would even notice. But there it is. And his jaw clicks. When he chews. Just on the one side—the left side. Not *loudly,* but all the time. I mean you're sitting there and you know it's going to happen and it always does. His mother carried him for nine and three-quarter months and then he was born feet first. Not that *that* has anything to do with anything." She spun around and poked at a little brass castle on the piano's top. "I'd burn some incense," she said. "If I *had* some incense." She spun around again. It was evidently a maneuver she enjoyed. "I have a big blue ugly on my leg," she said newsily. "See it?" She hiked up the leg of her pants and showed us the mauvish squiggle of a broken vein. "It's none of those things," she said, hiding it again. "Valentine used to wear these apricot-colored crepe-soled shoes. They were terrible shoes. My father used to call them brothel creepers. But I never minded them. He had this Afghan dog named Cassius that smelled like low tide and threw up under the stove just to spite me. And I never minded that. Because with Valentine everything was terribly requited." She leaned toward us, poised on her piano stool, immediate and full of secrets. "He bought me this giddy hat once. It had half of a bird of paradise on it and it was gorgeous but it was awful. I looked horrible in it and I wore it all the time. I wish I had it now, I'd still wear it." She winked at us, laughing, "And once he brought home The Last Supper made out of butterfly wings. If Sterling did that I'd call the police. But," she said realistically, "Sterling wouldn't do it." She took a metronome off the piano, wound it, and set it ticking on her knee. "Valentine was nice," she said, in a different, shy kind of way. "He used to put marigolds in our tea. He used to get terrible cold sores." She looked at us with wide, wide tearbright eyes. "Oh, Heaven's Judgment, he was *nice.*" I could hear her breathing. It sounded real and fallible against the ticking of the metronome. "That's what I'd like to teach," she said. "Not French."

"Excuse me," Teddy said, watching her, "but what is?"

Mrs. Kevin-Spending seemed hard pressed. "I'm trying to tell you to be careful!" she said. "I could just call out to all of you—be careful! please be careful! But you won't listen." She stopped the metronome without looking at it. "Well, you'd *better* be careful," she said in the silence. "There's danger. There's risk. Either the world hatches out like a big egg, or it doesn't. And if it doesn't, well, don't come crying to me."

"How could a person be careful, though?" I asked her, with my

eyes fixed tight on my current piece of cake. "I mean exactly how?" I had the feeling that something important was happening to me, but as was usual in my life, I didn't know what. It might be that someone was about to speak the truth.

Mrs. Kevin-Spending didn't say a word. I guessed that no one had asked her that before. All of a sudden I remembered something. It was just a thing about my father, that happened when I was young, but it broke in my head like a private, interior skyrocket.

"One time my father mowed the lawn in the rain," I told her. "In the middle of the night, I mean. In the rain."

"He did?" she said. She smiled with what I took to be high-level comprehension.

"My mother kept telling him to mow the lawn," I said quickly. "And he kept getting furious. And he went slamming out. He didn't come home for dinner or anything. When I woke up in the middle of the night there was thunder and lightning and you could hear the lawn mower going like mad. My mother was kneeling at the top of the stairs. I could see her right from my bed. She was wearing this yellow nightgown she had and she was watching my father and laughing like mad. Not out loud, you know, but like mad. She never even knew I saw her."

Mrs. Kevin-Spending darted from her stool and spooned sugar into the dregs of my cocoa. Teddy scowled at her cup, on principle, but Mrs. Kevin-Spending swept up the sugar bowl and concealed it in the kitchenette. I kept remembering my parents that night, fooling around in the kitchen when they thought I was asleep, playing *Whispering* on an old wind-up phonograph. Maybe they were dancing, I wouldn't know. I think *Whispering* is a terrible song, but it sounded pretty good that night, in the thunder.

Mrs, Kevin-Spending showed up carrying two dolls. "Look at these," she said eagerly, dumping them in my lap. "You'll adore them. They're for Sterling's British cousin's child. I adore children and it's a pity they make me so nervous. But they're so opinionated." She began to bounce an imaginary ball, pointing her toe for the leg-overs. "On the mountain stands a lady / who she is I do not know / all she wants is gold and silver / something, something, something-so."

"All she wants is a rich young beau," Teddy said, filling in the somethings.

"I'm terribly sorry but you're wrong! You remind me terribly of

Sterling's British cousin's child. Why, that's something I've known all my life. Gold and Silver, Isolde," she said enthusiastically, giving me a jab in the ribs. "Sit up straight, don't hunch over like that." She seized a double handful of my hair. "All of this cut off, a nice thick Empire bang." I got the idea then. She put her hands in her pockets and stood back, searching out, with something less than happy expectation, further measures. "Could you see your way clear to having about a foot taken off your winter coat? That *tweed* one?"

"I've thought of it," I said dazedly, "I really have. But everybody dresses like that in Philadelphia."

"Do you come from Phila*del*phia?" Mrs. Kevin-Spending said jubilantly. "How nice! Wear your darling tweed coat to class tomorrow and I'll fix it for you. I made this costume I'm wearing out of some portieres." She made a preening pirouette. "Don't you love the color? Absinthe!" She looked seriously at me again. "You know what else, Iseult? I think if you could inject a little more abandon into your personality, that would help."

"It sure would," Teddy said.

I was somewhat shamefaced, but in the spirit of the thing by that time. "Okay," I said.

"Try," she said kindly. "Remember gold and silver and be careful and try."

"Is gold and silver money or what?" Teddy said.

"Because it can happen to quite ordinary people," Mrs. Kevin-Spending said mystically. "People with big noses, people with bad handwriting, people who spit when they talk. I've seen it. I look for it, all the time."

"Does gold and silver mean money?" Teddy said doggedly.

"It means splendor!" Mrs. Kevin-Spending said. She smote herself dramatically on the chest, but she didn't look foolish at all. "He's dead," she said. "And no matter how careful you are, you can't do a thing about that. If there was anything you could do about that, you'd make a fortune. But *you're* not dead." She looked imperiously from Teddy to me. "It means splendor!"

I had a small experience of splendor at that time. The most splendid thing I could think of was my mother in her yellow nightgown, but it seemed to do me very well. I felt wise and brave and, for a change, on to the order of things. Mrs. Kevin-Spending spoiled it.

"He hung himself," she said.

"Oh my goodness," Teddy said.

Mrs. Kevin-Spending sat down on the bed. She tucked one foot beneath her and rested her cheek against a post. It was a girlish attitude, but she looked older than I'd have thought she could. "And so did Cassius," she said. "Two months before, on the second of June. Such a beautiful day. I took him for his walk and I put him in the car afterwards, for his nap. I always did that. But I left his collar and his leash on him and he got tangled up some way. He hung himself on the handle of the door. And Valentine found him." Her eyes moved vacantly around the room. "I detested that dog. It wasn't personal. I'm just not the sort of woman who was made to walk a great big smelly dog. But I never did him any injury on purpose. Not a *big* injury. Valentine doted on Cassius, but he knew that. He never said a word in reproach." She looked at us and her face was sharp and solemn. "It wasn't my fault!"

I saw reflected, in her long-lashed, aging eyes, my mother, dusting her Noguchi table, and my fat aunt wound around with sweet potato vines—and most of the women who went to Paris and most of the others who didn't. They were tear-distorted, dippy, beleaguered, bereft, but there they were: beautiful, silly, unlucky, plain, much too smart, or far from smart enough.

The room was still, but not for long. Mrs. Kevin-Spending hopped off the bed and came over to take the dolls from my lap. "Well," she said cheerily, "this one's from France and this one's from Spain. I've never been to Spain." She held out the dolls and there was a terrible minute when she might be going to give them to me.

"I have a huge collection of stuffed animals," Teddy said. "I have a panda as big as a three-year-old child that Ruthie Lambert's brother gave me. It sleeps with me."

"With us," I said.

Mrs. Kevin-Spending plumped out the skirts of the dolls and shifted them both to one arm. "Ruthie Lambert has body odor of the breath," she said. "Does her brother have it too?"

There was an interval of rather frantic silence. "An angel just flew over," Mrs. Kevin-Spending reported in the middle of it. She glanced at her watch. We rose as though a bell had rung and were shooed out into the hall. She walked with us to the top of the steps. "Goodnight," she said, "goodnight, ladies."

Teddy started down. I followed her for two steps and then I stopped and craned around. "I think you have a very beautiful apartment," I said, desperately. "I think you've had a very very fascinating life."

"Thank you," Mrs. Kevin-Spending said.

She stood at the top of the stairs and kissed her fingers at us until we turned on the landing. "Be careful of trolls on the stairs," she called gaily, "be careful!"

I was very careful. I could hear her red heels clattering, back to her open door and beyond it, the world—wider, brighter and more perilous than I'd known.

It was black outside. The block lay long ahead of us, thick with maple trees and jeopardy and promise. We passed a Colonial-style funeral parlor. Ghastly blue spotlights played on its pillared facade. Teddy caught hold of my belt. "I don't know if I told you," she said off-handedly, "I'm flushing that panda. And I'm checking Dougie Lambert out. He says 'take a shave.' I can't *stand* anybody that says that." We began to giggle. Teddy jumped up, using me for leverage, and snapped a pollydoodle off a maple tree. She broke it and fixed the gluey end on the bridge of her nose. Then she stuck the other half on my nose, walking backwards to do it. They rode there, two frail green single wings, two totems.

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RALPH FREEDMAN:

Imagination and Form in André Gide:

'La Porte étroite' and 'La Symphonie pastorale'

1

A reader of André Gide's fiction is easily mesmerized by the spectacle of the artist donning his literary disguises in the presence of his literary public. The close interrelation of Gide's novels with his various journals—themselves self-conscious enactments of the literary personality—arouses curiosity about the "real" person behind the literary poses. But the self that so kaleidoscopically reveals itself in the pages of Gide's books wears the mask of art: it is Baudelaire's fool at the pedestal of the image of Venus, bells, cap, and lonely awe. Ironic self-pity and an obsessive drive for self-exploration, meeting with the hard limits of his art, have created for Gide the image of the sincere hypocrite.

The famous Gidean problem of "sincerity" resolves itself into a question of the fictionalized presentation of the self, whatever its disguises may be, and thus eludes the moral stigma of hypocrisy so frequently applied to it. Nevertheless, it was Gide himself who had raised his aesthetic preoccupation with himself to a moral issue. As late as December, 1924, he suggested in a conversation with Roger Martin du Gard that some day a very knowing physician might discover that a gland of internal secretion, a *"capsule surréale"* opening him to the external world, had atrophied in him. Moreover, from his earliest journal entries to his so-called "first novel," *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide had been haunted by the moral and aesthetic implications of his famous distinction between the "sincere" poet and the prevaricating artist. "Morality," he wrote in 1892, "consists of supplanting the natural being (original man) with a manufactured being which is preferred." The latter, he continued, the artist, cannot be sincere; only the former, the poet, can be sincere, and the artist will seek to supplant the poet. In the struggle between both the work of art is born.

This conflict with superimposed control is formally conceived even as late as the period of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. For Edouard remarks:

"I gladly believe that only the artist is in a condition to dominate the lyrical state, though, in order to dominate it, he must have experienced it first." In Gide's career as a writer, this conflict between an assertion of the self as the arbiter of experience and the need for its submission to control (which must distort it) is underlined by his successive rejections of Romanticism and Symbolism and by his search for a Classicism in which truth to inspiration and truth to the confining letter might be identified. Indeed, one might suggest that in Gide's fiction form takes the place of an objectifying external world, that morally and aesthetically form is expected to play the role of the external world and to perform its tasks.

The Symbolist hero, through whose eyes the author could legitimately view the world from his own perspective, shaped, through his perceptions, the universe in which he was placed; furthermore, he sought adequate symbols detached from himself in which his visions and perceptions might be manifested. In Huysmans' *A rebours,* the novel moves through the hero's reflections; Moréas' *Le Thé chez Miranda* moves through *tableaux* in which the novel's action is contained; in Dujardin's *Les Lauriers sont coupés,* the very form is determined by the hero's perceptions in a manner often hailed as an incipient stream-of-consciousness. "The symbolic conception of the novel is polymorphous," Moréas proclaimed in his famous *Manifeste* of 1886; "in such a conception a unique personage moves in worlds transformed by his hallucinations, his temperament; in this deformation lies the single *reality.* Beings with mechanical gestures, with vague outlines, act around the unique hero; they are for him only pretexts for sensations and conjectures. His is the tragic mask, or that of the clown, of a perfect as well as a rational humanity."

As the Symbolist poet internalizes his visions of the world and detaches them from himself by refashioning them in concrete symbols to take their place, so Gide, the novelist, constantly transforms the world with his poetic and critical intelligence. A deformation of reality by the inner man, accomplished by Kafka in psychological terms, is accomplished, even in Gide's late novels, in terms of Novalis, Schopenhauer and Mallarmé. In a generally critical notice, Gide reflected on Villiers de l'Isle Adam: ". . . for life easily turns into a kind of parade, ironic and theatrical alike, sometimes in bad mummery; and it is the role of the artist not to believe in it, to cast on this nothingness a prestige, or better, to oppose to this nothingness, which must be avowed, another life, another world, a world created by the

artist himself, an artifice made by him which he will pretend to be a revelation of the pure idea, which he will soon call the true world, the work of art."

Beneath Gide's attempts to preserve the *récit* as the traditional form, this recognition—melancholy and ironic alike—remained as a persistent motif. It would not violate Gide's reputation for an unusual technical versatility, or do an injustice to his constant struggle for new forms and greater maturity, to suggest that he never fully transcended his Symbolist beginnings, as he never fully outgrew the Calvinism of his youth. Indeed, form as the neutral embodiment of the self became the Protestant confessional. Gide's searching self-analysis was not lost on his fiction, nor were the intuitive prevarications it practised. But the self as the stage of its own mental and emotional process was crystallized, perhaps in its purest form, in his two most Protestant novels, *La Porte étroite* and *La Symphonie pastorale*.

2

Gide's fiction is dominated by a tension between a loosely symbolic conception of the novel and its rigorous adherence to traditional forms. The difficulty of reconciling such forms with his intuitive leaning toward self-expression and identification with his characters led to the impressive experimentations of *Les Caves du Vatican* and *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. Moreover, in his endeavor to resolve this tension, Gide, throughout his career, often resorted to the journal and the first-person narrative as the most suitable device with which a self might be objectified. For example, the disproportionately large segment of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* which rests in the first-person point of view of Edouard's journal fulfills a need for a vantage point of aesthetic reflection from which to match from within the various other points of view. In *La Porte étroite* and *La Symphonie pastorale,* the journal already looks forward to this experimentation with its form.

In both its functions, of preserving the appearance of verisimilitude and of unconscious prevarication, the journal follows the established eighteenth-century tradition of the epistolary novel and the Rousseauistic confession. Its relation to the self as author and hero is defined by Gide's attempt to introduce "sincerity" into art as a moral and aesthetic criterion. Sincerity, Gide noted in 1891, requires that the idea, or the substance of expression, must command the word (interpreted as phrase, style, and entire works). An exact correspondence between both must be established, a task for which the journal would

be a most suitable genre. As late as 1924, Gide defined true objectivity in a way which suggests the journal in its function of embodying the self objectively while preserving a direct liaison with its source of expression: "That which passes today as 'objectivity' comes easily to novelists without interior landscapes. I can say that I am not interested in myself but only in certain ideas of which my self is the stage on which I function less as an actor than as a spectator, a witness."

In a manner reminiscent of Rimbaud's wood that cannot help it if it finds itself a violin, Gide turns the mind of the author into a stage on which his inner experiences or crises are enacted, then to be distanced from him in the novel's objective form. It is well known that in Gide's novels author and hero are seldom far apart, even where by his own testimony they are supposedly distinct. For example, doubt has been legitimately cast on his repeated assertions that Alissa's journal and Lafcadio's monologues are among the best of his writings just because these figures are most unlike himself. Although this relation, which for Friedrich Schlegel, for example, was self-evident, was always problematical for Gide, his momentary identifications with his protagonists were usually not doubted. The very concept of "subjective objectivity," achieved, as Henri Peyre suggested in discussing *La Porte étroite,* through a successive or simultaneous incarnation in his protagonists, implies that in the shoes of his characters Gide stepped into a world which then became his own. Whatever Gide's personal reasons for writing *La Porte étroite* and *La Symphonie pastorale* may have been, and whatever the value of their characters as keys to his life, both novels examine a crisis of conscience which, in the form of art, becomes that cluster of ideas of which he himself remained but the stage.

In addition to their use of the journal, a certain resemblance of theme is all these two novels have in common. This theme is that of conflict between the acceptance and abnegation of self, its expression or its submission to external control, which had already marked Gide's efforts in the cycle that led from *Le Voyage d'Urien* to *Les Nourritures terrestres* and, ultimately, to *L'Immoraliste.* Alissa's journal begins with her realization of her love and her need for sacrifice; her subsequent disintegration is mirrored both in the contents and the manner of her journal. In order to pass through the Strait Gate she must divest herself of her love, her fondness for art, her taste, her very humanity, even the support of her God, until, at the moment of her pitiful death, reminiscent of many pale Romantic heroines

dying for their virtue, she is faced with herself. In its course, Gidean self-examination had done away not only with a self that thinks and therefore is, but also with a self that derives its very existence from denying that it is anything more than a minute reflection of an inscrutably perverse divine will. The Pastor of *La Symphonie pastorale* also loves, but in order to pass through the Strait Gate with his questionable confusion of love and passion, he transforms less himself than the meaning of the divine word until, having lost everything, he kneels to pray with his burdened and devoted wife. The world the good Pastor had set askew is put to rights again, not by himself but by the sacrifices of those around him whose tragic acts he dutifully records.

This relation of self to divine commandment, enacted in journal passages and first-person narrative, is linked with the point of view through which it is expressed. Protestant emphasis on the individual conscience reflects the solipsism which these two novels betray and through which the misguided actions of their characters can be understood. Neither Alissa's deluded self-sacrifice nor the Pastor's equally deluded refusal to accept evil even in himself would have been possible without that crisis of conscience which is their subject: the awareness that too much granted to the individual self may lead to a distortion of truth, virtue, and law, either in the direction of needless sacrifice to virtue or in that of its equally needless perversion. Furthermore, the critique and irony in both novels lie precisely in Gide's remarkable feat of turning their moral and religious solipsism into an aesthetic one. Each in his own way re-enacts the dilemma of the Symbolist hero. Each deforms his universe if not in terms of his or her hallucinations, at least in accordance with a conscience, and reconstitutes it in journals which become "tragic masks" of a "perfect as well as of a rational humanity." For in both novels the theme is enacted through self-deception, through a kind of delusion, willed or unconscious, in which the protagonists deform not only the external world but also the substance of their experience itself by mistaking a counterfeit universe for a true one.

In its use of the journal, *La Porte étroite* employs both a first-person narrator who supplies part of a perspective and an intimate journal which contrasts effectively with the foregoing account. Interestingly, Jerome's *récit* is formally the closed and accomplished unit in which the entire narrative, that is, its characters, side-plots and complications, is embedded. Alissa's journal, on the other hand, while more mean-

ingful in its poetic beauty and psychological penetration, is an open form following those revealing marks of the subconscious which describe Gidean "inquietude" as the opposite of formal control. But not so much in itself as in constant juxtaposition with Jerome's otherwise uninspiring account, her journal transforms the novel by taking the reader on a voyage of discovery into the recesses of a strangely endowed and inexplicably haunted mind. The rationalizations Alissa gives for not marrying her lover, which in Jerome's story become the more incomprehensible to him the clearer they become to the reader, are now laid bare in the internal physiology of her mind. In Alissa's notes, chance remarks, events, encounters, even symbolic motifs suggested by Jerome are enlivened by a new, an interior meaning. Many crucial scenes in Jerome's story, for example, take place in gardens whose sensual lure and classical form are familiar to readers of *Les Nourritures terrestres* and *L'Immoraliste*. In a garden Jerome overhears Alissa discussing him with her father; in a garden he experiences the denouement with Juliette; his most crucial meetings with Alissa occur in gardens. But in Alissa's journal the garden is made explicit as an inner landmark of great importance which decides her course. In the unfamiliar surroundings of the home of her married sister Juliette, embarked on the first journey of her life, Alissa is impelled to think of nature no longer as God's handiwork, but as an embodiment of pagan mythology suggested to her by Jerome's letters from Italy. Frightened with a panic of the senses, she scurries into the house.

Even more directly, the "fall" of Alissa's mother, which sets the tone and the theme of the novel, is funneled from Jerome's account into Alissa's journal until the reader at last understands that the mother's sexuality has been turned into its passionate obverse in the daughter. In the *récit,* Jerome views the mother on a couch, surrounded by her lover and children; then, with masterful irony, Gide leads him to view Alissa in a scene which turns the mother's sensual bed into the daughter's pew. In the journal, this scene is re-enacted when Alissa's father views her lying in a posture of rare abandonment (her feet protruding from the self-enclosed severity of her gown) and is at once reminded of the mother. Immediately following this scene, moreover, Alissa experiences a fierce sense of panic when she feels Jerome's body close to her own as he bends over her to share her book. In the loneliness of her room she merges both scenes into one and prays to God to preserve her from "even the appearance of evil."

The many passages of direct and moving prayer which address to God what Alissa does not wish to address to herself (the analysis of her motives and actions) are rooted in the Pastor's sermon on the occasion of Lucile Boculin's elopement early in the book. In Jerome's account the direct statement of the passage from *St. Luke*: "Strive to enter in at the strait gate," is used as a dramatic climax, but in Alissa's journal it becomes the text for her evocations of inner torment that lead to her renunciation. For Alissa's prayers continually re-emphasize the motif of aloneness which communicates itself from Jerome's narrative to the intense portrayal of the moral need for isolation in Alissa's journal. They correspond to Alissa's conversations with Jerome in which she insists on aloneness and to her dream image of Jerome's death. Indeed, the motif of death as another aspect of complete personal isolation runs through the entire novel. It is introduced, in Jerome's account, with careful remarks about the contrast between Jerome's mother and Miss Ashburton, who eternally wore mourning, and Alissa's mother, who refused to wear mourning. It culminates in the obsessive preoccupation with death which permeates Alissa's notes. For in the journal death becomes more and more the visible counterpart of the Garden which encompasses beauty as well as the Fall. "See the lilies of the field . . . But oh Lord, where are they?"

It is easy to see how Gide came to consider Alissa's journal one of the best and most moving of his writings and Jerome's *récit* its uninteresting though necessary preface, but nonetheless the novel's irony and form are contained in a relation between them. Alissa's world, created from her deluded conscience, comes to life in her journal, but it requires the juxtaposition of Jerome's perception of her with her own to crystallize this world in aesthetic perfection. Mirroring the incoherence of the self in the closed form of the *récit,* the novel as a whole retroactively produces a double exposure through which its power is revealed. For the objective focus of a narrator who cannot see the real cause of human suffering through the jungle of his misplaced sensibilities and the subjective focus of a correspondent and diarist who recreates this suffering behind a screen of misleading rationalizations provide the poles between which the work's form is suspended.

In contrast with this delicate balance of two first-person accounts, *La Symphonie pastorale* exhibits a very different use of the journal. Advertised as a "history of Gertrude's moral and religious development," the book is set forth primarily as a confession. But the de-

formation of reality by the confessor and hero, unconscious in *La Porte étroite,* is made to cut with a moral edge which it did not possess in the earlier novel. First unwittingly, but soon deliberately, the Pastor remakes the world and the word of God, emphasizing the goodness of nature and the non-proscriptive passages of the Gospels at the expense of evil in nature and the sternness of Pauline prohibitions. For the Pastor seeks to raise a Galatea of exceptional ability who is not to know that the world is no longer the Garden of Eden.

In *La Porte étroite,* the Fall is the *fait accompli,* the condition by which its heroine is defined; in *La Symphonie pastorale,* it is the pivot around which the novel is made to turn. More than this, it becomes the reversal where one world collapses and another must take its place. At the same time, this reversal is prepared for by a scene of recognition to which the Pastor is led by his wife and by the declaration of love professed by a deluded Gertrude. Thus, translating the classical terms of "recognition" and "reversal" into Biblical terms of "awareness" and "Fall," Gide, in a manner reminiscent of his early Symbolist *Traité du Narcisse,* channels his story into a classical structure. Unity of action is facilitated by the journal of confession which, by the very nature of the genre, must suppress, or press into its service, all that is not germane to its subject. Symmetry of form is rigorously maintained through the balance between the two notebooks, which, though disproportionate in physical length, neatly divide the action at the point of the Pastor's first recognition. The Pastor, furthermore, becomes in Gide's subtle interplay of Biblical motifs and classical structure a passive counterpart of the tragic hero. Although his deliberate blindness brings down tragic consequences far less on himself than on those, like Gertrude and his son Jacques, whom he uses for his purpose, he is not only the narrator but the protagonist as well. True, he is, if anything, an inversion of the classical hero. He is no Prometheus or Philoctetes, no Oedipus or even a Gidean Saul. Yet the measure of his fall is not taken by his stature but by the enormity of his descent from Grace.

At the same time that Gide implies the structure of classical tragedy, he also couches his story in the form of the internal confession. Indeed, both recognitions, that of the Pastor in the geometrical center of the novel, and that of Gertrude in the end, are arrived at not through external action but through an inner progression whose stages are marked by Gertrude's process of learning. For as she rises from a condition of literal blankness—her mental universe a veritable *tabula*

rasa—first to an innocent awareness of nature, then to a search beneath the perceptual surface, the moral implications follow close behind.

This internal development toward recognition and reversal is made perfectly clear in the Pastor's record. At first the "wall of darkness" between them grows less thin as Gertrude's experiences begin to take shape. But soon she seeks to go beyond her sensations. Sound seems flat; despite her blindness, she probes into the meaning of light and color. "She always used things," the Pastor naively records, "[which] she could touch or feel in order to explain what was beyond them . . ." Understanding is increased, and the reversal prepared for, by a concert of Beethoven's symphony from which significantly the title is drawn. The eighteenth-century "organ of color"—like the eighteenth-century "savage child"—is explored in its religious implications and made into a symbolic motif. The awareness of multiple harmonies of sound prepared Gertrude's intelligence for their correspondence first with harmonies of light and color, then with their moral implications. Is there, she inquires after the concert, a deeper perceptual as well as moral level to correspond to that world of sound she had just witnessed? Awareness of happiness entails knowledge of its opposite. Awareness of feminine beauty, discovered after the concert, entails awareness of Eve's fatal transgression. As, with the further aid of Dr. Martins and Condillac, Gertrude gradually widens her perceptual horizon, the rationalized passion of the Pastor is correspondingly increased. Her growing awareness of her sensual potentialities bears within it, as Dr. Martins had wisely predicted, the seed of the Fall.

The motif of "light" toward which a blind Gertrude probes from the surface of increasingly intelligible sounds also becomes the subject for her "moral and intellectual development." For throughout her religious education, the most dominant feature remains the Pastor's exploitation of the sensual and moral ambiguity of "light" and "love." Christ of the Gospels is love and therefore hallows their passion. Christ says in the Gospels that the world is light and therefore this part of the doctrine alone is suitable for the sightless. These ambiguities, related to the novel's reversal, are first made explicit in the Pastor's interchange with his son on texts from St. Paul's *Epistles to the Romans* and in their discussion of happiness as restraint. But in the end it is through Jacques, who represents less a sexual than a religious rival, that the true meaning of these ambiguities is revealed to Gertrude's anguished eyes at the moment sight is restored.

The conflict between the Gospels and *The Epistles of St. John* on the one hand and *The Epistles of St. Paul* on the other emphasizes a contrapuntal movement which is introduced into the drama the moment Jacques is seriously drawn into it. Although constantly hinted at by the Pastor, the true nature of those documents which he had suppressed in his education of Gertrude is not revealed until after his challenge by Jacques. Then "light" and "love" of the father's misguided vocabulary, rationalized through one part of Scripture, are opposed by the son's contradictory interpretation of another part of Scripture, suggesting an argument as well as an interplay of opposing motifs. The final discovery that Jacques had clandestinely acquainted Gertrude with these forbidden passages restores the counterpoint of "sin" to the Pastor's carefully nurtured phantom of Eden. Authority and law, the hitherto suppressed opposites of self and conscience, are now revealed through Jacques' and Gertrude's conversions.

Gide's use of Scripture, his employment of contrapuntal motifs and figures within the framework of a predetermined classical form cast the Pastor's journal of confession into an objective focus. Yet the story within this form is entirely embedded in the narrator's consciousness. Other figures, even Gertrude, Jacques, and the incredibly understanding Amélie, are seen as reflections of the Pastor's inner record. Vivid images of nature and unusually lavish descriptions which punctuate the narrative are bent to conform to the purpose of his confession, that is, to reflect upon his relations with Gertrude. Through its form, the journal of *La Symphonie pastorale* indeed becomes an objective stage on which a moral crisis is enacted through the internal denouement of its protagonist.

3

We have seen how in two of Gide's important novels inner experience is objectified through different uses of the journal form. Both novels utilize the first-person account of the hero not only to convey a sense of intimacy but also to view the world from a particular perspective and to heighten this vision to art. In this way, the journal represents that platform on which the hero's subjective deformation of reality can be enacted in aesthetic form. In *La Porte étroite,* it is used to implement the tension between two points of view in which the novel's substance and irony are implied. In this function, the journal appears as that "play within the play" which Gide had praised in

Hamlet and in *The Fall of the House of Usher,* that is, as the aesthetic reflection of a work's purpose set within the total art-work. In *La Symphonie pastorale,* the journal converts all points of view except that of the diarist to an inner drama which in its structural symmetry and reversal suggests the model of classical tragedy. Both novels reflect their author and heroes in a form which provides that *"chiffre de la transcendence"* to which Claude-Edmonde Magny referred in the different context of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs.* Unlike Mann's method in *Doktor Faustus,* in which author and protagonist struggle with an external reality as well as with themselves and an intricate form, Gide's method posits a self which uses persons, objects, and ideas primarily as images with which to illuminate and objectify an inner conflict.

The music of Gide's violin, however, is not really Rimbaud's, nor would it be true to imply that in his search for form Gide followed exclusively a Symbolist tradition. Although his heroes seem to remake their worlds in their images, the forms they seek are not wholly suggested by symbols of inner states. Form was to be "classical," and "classical" as well as "form" were taken by Gide in an aesthetic and moral sense alike. In a brief reply to the editors of the journal *Renaissance* Gide once said:

> True classicism is not the result of external constraint; that which remains artificial produces only academic works. It seems to me that the qualities which we like to call "classical" are above all moral qualities, and I consider classicism a harmonious vessel of virtues among which the first is modesty. Romanticism is always accompanied by pride, by infatuation. Classical perfection implies not the suppression of the individual, . . . but his submission, the subordination to the word in the phrase, to the phrase in the page, to the page in the work.

In Gide's *Lettres à Angèle,* there occurs a discussion of a Japanese dancer, in which he defines true "lyricism" as the tempering of the "realism" of immediate experience in a manner acceptable to art. Through balance, suspension, harmony, limitation, through the submission of inspiration to the idea of preconceived beauty, through the *attente très préparée,* true incarnation of the self in form is accomplished. The "lyrical state" without this balance is the morally loose state; after the Fall the artist must emerge and correct this original sin. In this way, no matter what its later variations may have been, form for Gide becomes the vehicle for his aesthetic Protestantism.

The success or failure of Gide's "classicism" in fiction, grafted on a Symbolist conception of the hero, is not easily determined. Certainly, the characters of *La Porte étroite* and *La Symphonie pastorale,* precisely because their motives are not plausibly rooted in the external world, lack a conviction which, for all their subjectivism, the characters of James and Proust possess. Gide's experimentations in *Les Caves du Vatican* and *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* show his persistent attempts to come to terms with the external world and at the same time to develop forms from within a created experience that would be adequate to their tasks. But Gide's strength as a writer lies precisely in his weakness as a novelist, in the formulation of personal "inquietude" in terms of a controlling form that fashions experience into an act of aesthetic imagination.

BERNICE AMES:

Wherever Water Gathers

Wherever water gathers
in gutters where fat pigeons wade,
their steps stitching the street's rough seam,
in mudhole commas of construction,

at the lip of a pitcher
balanced and sliding,
at the rim of the faucet
held in mirror tension

light wades in, fearless,
and shadow;
shimmer and balance spread a surface.

Wherever water gathers
air plumes with promise
and motion breeds music.

GEORGE P. ELLIOTT:

Hummingbird and Mighty Fortress

It all already is arranged. A shaft of bright
Sun slants through the clear glass onto the pew and me;
Outside, hovering in the sun, wings spray the light
Radiate round themselves, a whole rainbow; I see
The quivering prism, iridescent and blurred,
And know that not wings in the light create the free
Beauty haloing this illuminated bird,
But my revering eye which knows what they have done.

In the beginning, where I was not, what was the Word?

He makes us make again the Feste Burg he sung,
Luther, whom worms have turned to mud, raindrops, rainbow;
Our chords are not his, our fortresses fly, our tongue
Is wrong — and I'm afraid, to think I shall not know
The Word, even its sound. The song-words of this dead
Man bond us here until, still as they came, they go;
And I am afraid, who, like him, shall melt to mud.

"A handful knew by faith Jesus, who was a man,
Was God." I was not there. I believe in one God
Maker of all I know and of all that I can
Not know, substance without shadow, Whose mind englobes
Everything but our minds and Who is not a man.
Who surely could not be a man. Preacher, your robes
Don't quite cover up your business suit; and when I see
You smile, I think of that plush comforter of Job's
Who said, "What do you know that is not clear to me?"
What? Terror of God! Oh, I wish your plushness knew
Your words' terror, or at least their absurdity.
He was preposterous Whom you logic God into,
A hubristic rabbi; thought of Him stands the hair

On my neck stiff; substance become shadow... Do you,
Preacher, as I do not, know your words? Were you there?

Christ is the crux, and do not logic me. I doubt
By logic even what one is, much less the square
Root of minus one, that imagined sign without
Which no one can explain such of visible things
As logic can explain. What are these words about?
Men devised them, and I spray them forth as bird's wings
Spray rainbow/halo. It depends on where you stand
What you see; and the crux is the imagining.

Preacher, as you are priest, I will take from your hand,
As I was born Christian, take and drink, take and eat,
Signs of terrible Christ: hoping to be unmanned,
Untimed for a time, forced into, unbrained, complete —
As lovers hope, in their unfortressed bodies, some
Haloing thing will come when they shudder, will meet
Them in that still moment at which they shall have come,
Some thing which sees them as one thing, as a caught part
Of beauty, as quivering wings in a ray of sun.
I kneel for sustenance at a spiritual bar
Willingly will-less, the square root of minus one,
Like lovers mounting to the moment when they are.

Perhaps the Holy Ghost, which is the Word, is this.

I scribble on the back of a church calendar
Words of a beginning: *It all already is.*

WILLIAM L. HEDGES:

The Empson Treatment*

Four Legs, Two Legs, Three Legs

Delphic and Theban and Corinthian,
Three lines, by the odd chance, met at a point,
The delta zero, the case trivial.

A young man's cross-road but a shady one.
Killing a mistaken black cat in the dark
He had no other metaphysical trait.

God walks in a mysterious way
Neither delighteth he in any man's legs.

The wrecked girl, still raddled with Napoleon's paint,
Nose eaten by a less clear conqueror,
Still orientated to the average dawn,
Behind, Sahara, before, Nile and man
A toy abandoned, sure, after so many,
That the next sun will take her for a walk,
Still lifts a touching dog's face eager for a sign.

Not one for generalising his solutions
Oedipus placed the riddle with a name.
Another triumph for the commonplace.
While too much to pretend she fell and burst
It is a comfort that the Sphinx took such an answer.

In William Empson's *Collected Poems* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949) the poem is accompanied by the following notes by the author:

"It struck me passing through Cairo that the Sphinx has a look of pathetic and devoted public spirit (like a good deal of Egyptian work) which makes the popular idea of her as a sinister mystery seem off the point. This made me think about Oedipus, who destroyed an ogre-like Sphinx by answering its riddle, and therefore had bad luck—at least they made him king out of grati-

* I am indebted to Jane and Rufus Blanshard and to Homer Swander for numerous suggestions in constructing this interpretation.

> tude for this feat, and that was how he came to marry his mother. He killed his father at a crossroad between the three towns of my first line; they seem meant to symbolise three ways of life, rather as the legs in the riddle do. A delta is a mathematical expression for the area of the triangle, here zero; he short-circuited life by keeping it all in the family. A metaphysician (somebody said) is like a blind man looking for a black cat in the dark which isn't there, and black cats are for luck. As Oedipus was wholly unconscious of his crimes it is uncertain whether he had an Oedipus complex, and he answered the riddle merely by saying Man, not by telling us anything about him. Napoleon's romantic paint can just be seen on her face; it is denied that her nose was broken by a deliberate cannon-shot of his. I have never seen anything in print about how dramatically she is placed between the desert and the sown; it seems that she always was, but at one time the river ran close under her paws."

A once-over:

The title of the poem asks again the Sphinx's riddle, What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening? At least this was the riddle of what Empson in his note calls "an ogre-like Sphinx" at Thebes which leaped to death when Oedipus gave the answer, Man. The first six lines, however, apparently concern not so much the riddle as the murder of Laius by his son Oedipus, which happened on the way to Thebes. The meeting of father and son, which in the end proves largely to have determined the tragedy of Oedipus, seems at the moment an "odd chance." And for all the reputation for wisdom he acquired by solving the riddle, this encounter at the intersection reveals Oedipus as unimaginative, literal-minded, superstitious, even perhaps quixotic. Empson's note here is helpful: "A metaphysician (somebody said) is like a blind man looking for a black cat in the dark which isn't there, and black cats are for luck." But what nonexistent black cat Oedipus was looking for and thought he had found will necessitate later discussion.

The next two lines seem so pivotal as to defy anything but a final analysis. However, it can be remarked in passing that they oppose God and man, or God's way and man's way. Or they show His dissatisfaction with the answer to the riddle.

A Sphinx finally appears in the section which follows. Empson's notes explain this image as the origin of the poem: "It struck me passing through Cairo that the Sphinx has a look of pathetic and devoted public spirit . . . which makes the popular idea of her as a

sinister mystery seem off the point." "Napoleon's romantic paint can just be seen on her face; it is denied that her nose was broken by a deliberate cannon-shot of his." Taken together, these seven lines and the notes considerably diminish this Sphinx's importance. Whether or not Empson knows that the statue at Gizeh is supposed to have a man's face, he thinks of the Sphinx as a "girl." And she is a common girl, in various senses. No longer intact—her ruin she owes, at least partially, to soldiers and war—she has now a painted face, a mere "touching dog's face." She is man's best friend, faithful perhaps as the "average dawn," but unused, a "toy"—and "abandoned" at that.

The final five lines bring Oedipus and the Sphinx together. The note says, "he answered the riddle merely by saying Man, not by telling us anything about him." Thus the wisdom of Oedipus, the poem tells us, was only "Another triumph for the commonplace." The answer was good enough for the Sphinx in the sense that it made her lie down and doggedly play dead. But Oedipus apparently failed to completely do away with her, whether she be taken as monster, public servant, or some arresting combination of both.

Second-guessing:

In one sense, no doubt, the apparatus of the riddle in the Oedipus story does seem childish. As riddles go, this one seems so labored as almost to preclude cleverness in the guesser; why giving the answer entitled Oedipus to kingly wisdom perhaps remains a mystery for modern readers. But it is difficult to believe that Empson is simply deflating the Oedipus myth. The tone of the poem is not that decisive. In fact the tone is not particularly decisive about anything, and I am inclined to think that recognition of the poem's neutrality, which may be another way of saying its willingness to be ironic at its own expense, is a prerequisite to any interpretation. It is impossible, for instance, in spite of its being a "trivial" point, to be condescending towards Oedipus's behavior with Laius, for Empson's inversion of noun and adjective in "the case trivial" stresses the importance of the seemingly unimportant. Nor is the commonplace so simply patronized as our summary treatment might suggest. The repetitions of "still" in the seven-line section to some extent preserve the impressiveness of the Sphinx's staying qualities. And the "wrecked girl" eternally "orientated to the average dawn," if, for the moment, we take the girl as girl and not as statue, frames an image of woman stretched out toward the east in ruin. "Raddled" can mean beaten as well as striped. And

the nose, not chipped or broken, but "eaten by a less clear conqueror," belongs possibly to a decaying corpse. To certain readings the answer that was given this "pathetic" Sphinx must seem tragic. And the last two lines of the poem, referring negatively to the other Sphinx (at Thebes), which at least according to what the myth expects us to believe, "fell and burst," while the Sphinx in the poem remained fixed, further interfere with an interpretation of the poem as simply belittling. For although the clause, "It is a comfort that the Sphinx took such an answer," can be read with irony, the shift back to the present tense provides a strong temptation for poet and reader (as opposed to Oedipus, who wasn't up to it) to universalize.

Most obviously of course our first glance at the poem was uncomplicated by an Oedipus complex. The note tells us explicitly, Oedipus "short-circuited life by keeping it all in the family." And the hints of triangulation deepen the mystery of Oedipus's experience, even though certain points of view may cast doubts on the reality of the mysterious "ogre-like" Sphinx. "A delta," says Empson, "is a mathematical expression for the area of a triangle." Here the triangle is merely a "point," where three "lines" come together; so the delta is "zero." But the note explains that "delta zero" also symbolizes the short-circuit. And a secondary meaning for "trivial" is threefold. The threefold aspects of Oedipus are obvious: he killed his father at the coming together of three roads; the three cities referred to in the first line shaped his life; and his "case" was a triangle of father, mother, and son, or husband, wife, and lover.

Of course, in one sense, stumbling over such details needn't change the first impression the poem yielded. One might admit that there is a second riddle in connection with Oedipus and that by living his life (acting out our fantasy) he gave that riddle a "name"—the Oedipus complex. And the simple conclusion would remain: whether he answered with Man or his own name, Oedipus explained very little, and we can take only small comfort in his discoveries.

Depth in surfaces:

But "the three towns . . . seem meant to symbolise three ways of life, rather as the legs in the riddle do." If the poem can't convince us of its own complexity, Empson's note can. And the title suggests that the riddles, which the poem says Oedipus only began to explain, still need understanding.

To feel the tautness of the poem we can explore its first three lines. The subject is the "trivial" meeting. Obviously it occurred in Greece. But here already we encounter Egyptian overtones, which are to emerge as the dominant theme at the ninth line. Sphinxes are associated with both the Egyptian and the Greek Thebes; indeed the Greek Sphinx appears to be an importation from Egypt (see Graves). And "delta" is unavoidably Egyptian. The Nile delta is triangular in shape, and Gizeh is located at the apex. Perhaps even the pyramids should be brought onto the set as one more connection between triangles and the Sphinx. But Sphinx means to draw tight or to squeeze —the shortening of another circuit. Thus "delta zero"—with "zero" visualized as a small circle—could be symbolic shorthand for the riddle of the Sphinx, in which "case trivial" the threefold aspect becomes the three sections of the question about Man.

Or go over the last three lines of the passage of the "wrecked girl." One meaning of "take her for a walk" enhances the household quality of the Sphinx—she is like a dog which expects to be given an outing every morning. But the way the poem concentrates on legs and walking makes a literal reading natural also. Then we feel the faith of the corpse that it will rise in the dawn, or of the statue that it will come to life. And unlike the Sphinx-shape "with lion body and the head of a man" in the desert sands of Yeats' "The Second Coming," this image, if it takes a walk, will not slouch "towards Bethlehem to be born," but go west with "the next sun." West is where spirits go. West is "Behind, Sahara." And west, if there is an echo of Yeats here —the "touching dog's face" makes a neat contrast to the "gaze blank and pitiless as the sun" in Yeats—west may imply a hope (possibly vain) in what is opposite to east. The sun moving west holds out light, perhaps revelation itself, even if with another hand the poem's "average dawn" takes back the same characteristics. Empson at any rate seems to have been aware that the Sphinx at Gizeh pointed east for significant reasons even if he didn't know it bears the face of the god of the sunrise.

Not to stop here, we double the preceding ambiguity by seeing the subject of these three lines as not only "wrecked girl" but "man" —a vision prompted, if not absolutely justified, by Empson's omission of a comma between "man" and "A toy." Then what applies to sphinxes applies to man as well. He is a "toy abandoned," his face a "touching dog's" as he waits "for a sign." And his naivete begins to look profound.

In "Notes on Notes" Empson says that "puzzle interest in poetry" seems to him "an old and natural thing." Though he considers his notes analogous to the answers provided by makers of crossword puzzles, his analogy is not complete, for his notes are not whole answers, but only clues or hints, only extensions, one is tempted to think, of the clues in the poem itself. It may finally prove impossible to decide how far beyond the clues the real answer lies, for the fun Empson's criticism finds in puzzling out other people's poetry suggests it may be infinitely distant. This particular poem seems not meant for the ear, at least not for the sensual ear, nor for the incantatory voice. It will hardly tolerate one sort of emphasis to the prejudice of another. It is a poem which, through its uninsistent tone and loose (or is it really tight?) syntax, deliberately avoids coming to a conclusion. Its ambiguity involves implicit (rather than explicit) paradox. It seems a riddle contrived to embarrass us with a wealth of answers. And if we go too far, perhaps it is Empson who leads us on.

As another example of the almost conflicting claims, both equally valid, that a line may make upon the poem, let us take "He had no other metaphysical trait." Empson starts us off in the note with, "As Oedipus was wholly unconscious of his crimes it is uncertain whether he had an Oedipus complex." This is supposed to simplify him, leave him relatively uncomplicated. Such a reading fits the "odd chance" of the meeting with his father. Coming from Delphi, about to go to Thebes, trying to avoid Corinth and the killing of his father, Oedipus, killing Laius, thought he was on the road to success. And perhaps his lack of vision was only stupidity. Not knowing who his father was, he should have been wary of killing any man. But all of this suggests at the same time how complicated and even "metaphysical" he may have been. Trying to translate poem and note here, we get something like "He killed the luck he was looking for which didn't exist." Oedipus had gone to Delphi, in a symbolic sense seeking his father, and had been told only that he would kill him. Had he been able to recognize his father, he might have had better luck, although the implication is that he "had" to kill him before he could recognize him. If he actually had the complex, in addition to the complex's having him, then he wanted to kill his father. And in that case the black cat crossing his path is neither good luck nor father, but bad luck: Oedipus thinks he slays it when he slays Laius, but real bad luck turns up years later.

A further stab at "metaphysical" is to read it as in "metaphysical

poetry." "Trivial" pertains to the trivium, which embraces both rhetoric and logic. The Sphinx raises a question which is in various ways academic. And Oedipus is as metaphysical as certain poets to the extent that he delights in riddles.

What the poem walks on:

The answer Oedipus provided is apocalyptic in its recognition of the commonplace—a man has to learn to stand on his own two feet. And this is what the Oedipus complex means, which also involves three stages of maleness—childishness, the power of maturity, and the weakness of old age. The transition from childhood to manhood is crucial, and on this phase the Sphinx was perhaps an authority, since, while it had a human face, it still went by four legs. Oedipus had left for good the home of his foster parents, Corinth, and was trying to follow the straight and narrow path from Delphi when he ran into his Theban future, which happened also to be his past. He failed, as his father had failed, to understand the wisdom of the oracle. Oedipus gained a maturity of sorts by taking the manhood of another; the only association of his father to survive the killing was the humble shepherd, whom Laius had ordered years before to kill Oedipus, but who had not had the heart to do so. In mythical terms this reduced the image of a father from king to shepherd (see Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*). Oedipus went on to Thebes and answered the riddle there with what was on his mind, Man, thus earning the right to take his father's place as king and marry his mother. Thence followed the rest of what Empson in his note calls the "bad luck." Not self-conscious enough, not able to reflect on his "solutions"—the one at the intersection and the one at Thebes—Oedipus did not become a real man until recognition was thrust upon him, at a time when he was almost ready to take the crutch of old age. "Another triumph for the commonplace."

It is probably possible to read three ways of life more than once into the three cities, but applied strictly to Oedipus they suggest wisdom, which at Delphi appears divine, the force or strength at Thebes, which totally lacked wisdom and was thus perhaps brute, sub-human, or monstrous (as the Greek Sphinx has it, ogre-like), and thirdly the human sympathy associated with the Corinthian foster-parent. This separation of powers roughly parallels the constitution of the traditional Sphinx, which had in addition to the animal body

and human head (i.e., the one at Gizeh) wings, which might have elevated it above the bestial and human levels. Would it then be too much to see the last three sections of the poem as concerning successively God or spirit and mankind, humanity or humanism and men, and animality or physicalness and a particular man?

There should be no quarrel on the first. And since it is in the third that the Oedipus complex is made virtually explicit, sexuality seems to be the basic relationship there. The middle section is more complicated: the ruined girl implies a kind of brutality, while public spirit is almost metaphysical. But how better to describe Man or humanity in this connection than as a combination of divine and animal characteristics? Man is the link involving both extremes.

Now what does the poem have to say? If our triply complex Oedipus meets a triple-natured Sphinx, we can look for at least six kinds of significance in the one word Man, since in effect it was twice offered as an answer, once in the slaying of Laius and again in solving the riddle. It would be more than pedantic to enumerate separately the meanings and sub-meanings. Some, I hope, have been adequately suggested already. And I propose simply to let a few others emerge by association, proceeding generally, as do both the poem and the Sphinx, from immortal intimations at the top to the animality at the bottom.

Final introduction:

"God walks in a mysterious way / Neither delighteth he in any man's legs." These two legs of verse support God and man together, but the body of God and the body of man do not seem here necessarily united. The poem seems to take God fairly seriously, but it is a question how seriously God takes man. Not delighting "in any man's legs" may be God's way of showing that man at no stage, in childhood, manhood, or old age, measures up to His expectations. If so, answering the riddles as Oedipus did, giving the "pathetic" and public-spirited Sphinx the satisfaction he did, would not be enough for a "mysterious" walking God. On the other hand, "God walks in a mysterious way" echoes a famous line about God performing wonders or miracles. And the most miraculous aspect of one god at any rate is that he became man; he walked on man's legs and suffered—presumably without delight.

Christ enters the poem, at least negatively, by the "cross-road."

Empson hyphenates here, whereas he spells it "crossroad" in the note. Of course, literally the Oedipus incident occurred at a meeting of three roads, not at a crossroad. So the cross is further emphasized. Oedipus becoming a man, like God becoming Man, is facing the crisis of his life. He is trying to walk on two legs at noon, the hour of the crucifixion. But this is a "shady" triumph, in contrast to Christ's brightness. Oedipus in some ways parodies Christ or parries His implications. The Corinthian son seeking the Theban father is deceived by the spirit of the Delphic utterance that ought to have clarified the connection. Oedipus kills the father instead of being killed for him.

And trinity takes us back to the "case trivial," a phrase which looks as though it will bear almost any weight. At least it virtually sums up in itself the fundamental ambiguity of the poem. Apparently stemming from its reference to the medieval trivium, trivial has many of the contradictory connotations of "academic." It implies knowledge and wisdom on the one hand, but useless knowledge, inapplicable or stale knowledge—what is "commonplace"—on the other. Looking over the entry for the word in the NED, one gains the impression that Empson has familiarized himself with it (see *Seven Types of Ambiguity*). In one sense the word even involves walking, or at least the appendages that one sort of animal moves on; trivial relates to the trivium—that is to the "three anterior ambulacra"—of an echinoderm. I don't mean to drag a starfish into the poem but simply to suggest the sort of thing that may have been going through Empson's mind. A line which struck me as curious until I went to the dictionary is, "Oedipus placed the riddle with a name." One can work up images and, especially, make connections with "commonplace" in the next line. But read literally, this statement seems unusual until one notices the second meaning for trivial, "Placed where three roads meet." Then one goes on to notice the seventh: "Applied to names of animals and plants: a. to a Latin name added to the generic name to distinguish the species . . . b. to a name in common as distinct from scientific use: Popular, vernacular, vulgar." Again, one wouldn't want to make this a part of the poem, but it does seem to hint that the poem is about naming, identifying, making recognizable, clarifying, and that it is perhaps about different kinds of names, specific and generic (Oedipus and Man?) or learned and vulgar. A particularly Christian ring to trivial does appear in the NED, though not as a whole meaning in itself. Trivial as a substantive may be any trivium; and for example we are given a fifteenth-century writer

speaking of the "triuialle" of theological virtues, which are, of course, faith, hope, and charity. One point to the meeting of the three lines, then, could be that it is a trivial trivial; threefoldness is involved, but not the threefoldness of the Trinity or the Christian virtues.

Finally the substantive, trivial, means in mathematics (NED quoting *Century Dictionary,* 1891) "A coefficient or other quantity not containing the quantities of the set considered." A trivial case, I am told, is one which makes true statements on paper but for which no actual situation exists to apply them to—again the suggestion of the academic ambiguity. The experience of Oedipus, though it works up into a beautiful, internally consistent theory of man's behavior, remains in some ways inapplicable, because the theoretical man doesn't quite exist, and, according to a truly religious view, nothing, not even the theory, can make man function or walk on earth as he would like. Christ's experience, on the other hand, might save man, at least for the next world.

"I have never seen anything in print about how dramatically [the Sphinx] is placed between the desert and the sown . . ." This observation virtually exhausts Empson's note, though without, perhaps, making perfectly clear what the drama is. One does feel, however, some conflict between beast, or wilderness, and an ideal man. And this Sphinx, with human head, is on the side of man, if not of the angels. The "pathetic" face "still" looks at man, to man, or for man. Man theoretically belongs with Nile and fertility rather than with arid Sahara. But there appears to be no real sign of manhood or humanity. The Sphinx, between two phases or periods of experience, has an eternal "zero" hour, or zero year. If she is God, she waits for man to realize divine possibilities. But instead of a man she gets an Oedipus. The complex problem of the riddle is always how to get man up on his hind legs. As long as he is unable to stand by himself, even God will need a crutch by nightfall, because God will, practically, amount to no more than man in his mortal aspect. Empson's confounding or compounding of the Egyptian and the Greek sphinxes perhaps implies a failure of sheer humanism to lift mankind significantly above the level achieved by the Egyptians much further back toward the dawn of civilization. Ultimately the poem seems to be religious, if not precisely Christian. Though the conventional answer to the Sphinx's riddle has man walking in a mysterious way, Empson asserts, "God walks in a mysterious way." Taken with the following line, this might indicate that, not only is God the answer to the real riddle (as

opposed to the trivial one), but God is the answer even to the Sphinx's riddle. Historically the idea of the divine perhaps moves upward from totemism and man's fear of brute power, through his respect for himself in humanism, to his love of what is beyond him, finally symbolized in the three legs of the triangular Christian God. But the evolution isn't finally achieved. Playing once more with connotations of "Delphic and Theban and Corinthian," one is tempted to see three "lines" of religion, Greek, Egyptian, and Christian, *not* meeting by "the odd chance," at the "cross-road" in this poem. It will take another walk in the sun or Son across the desert to reach delta infinity.

Freudianism has only begun to be applied here, though the poem obviously invites it. Cocteau in *La Machine infernale* has accentuated the womanliness of the Sphinx, turning her virtually into Jocasta's rival for the love of Oedipus. Perhaps the "wrecked girl" gets at this aspect of the problem, her life having been ruined because her man, for all his violence, failed to give her full satisfaction. She is essentially a domestic animal, but man has turned her into an "abandoned" toy. One might also make the Christ story, the killing of a cultural father figure, run simultaneously with the murder of Laius. But one would want to be more anthropological before making the attempt—or before looking for Cleopatra or putting the black cat more nearly under the auspices of the Sphinx.

M. M. LIBERMAN:

The Cross-Country Runner

In this room it was very cold. The old steam radiator sweated and sputtered and fifed relentlessly; all day long it had insulted my head with its clanging. But it made no difference; if the room was warm, I was cold; there was no trying to get away from the damned clanging thing and the drafts at floor-level, making fish of my feet. Twice I got angry and moved to put my coat on to get out, but what would have been the advantage? It's a nasty time of year in this country; its very emblem is the rusty puddle under a pane of ice, wreathed with sootsnow. In the street, sleet burns your face, sweat freezes at the small of your back. Besides, my work is inside. And I'm sure of this—I know it from experience—from time to time I'll want to die in this clammy, clanging, steam-shrunken cell. But I won't. Once I was colder than this, a long time ago, and I'm still here.

The Countess who puts out a magazine had taken my poem, so I'd make out until summer. In fact, she *hadn't* taken it, but she would. I knew it was a good poem, and if it's good, she'll take it. And she pays well. A poet always knows when he's written something good, no matter what he tells you—or himself; all the agonizing is simply when he knows what he's doing is fudging; then he stops writing because he can't stand poking around in his own dirt; then he complains he can't work; just doesn't know why. He knows why well enough. He knows.

I had enough to pay the rent and buy food until I'd get her check. But I had no money for a drink. The bottle I'd been nursing I'd finished the night before. At Mule Skotendis' place down the street I had a Greek salad and a bottle of ale. That left me twenty cents. I wouldn't touch my food money. I went down shivering all the way, once I forced myself to get out of the room; I was almost sorry I'd gone out, the air was so raw. Then you have to watch out for trucks and taxis and college boys; they like to wrap a puddle around your neck, turn you into a dripping chocolate soldier, fresh from the dipper. I stepped around carefully, humming and talking to myself to pretend I was warm. Oh I have been good servant to the king, no piddling drip-puddle soldier, cookie-caked in sleetstreet. From half a block away, I could see that Mule's was as good as empty.

I climbed up to Mule's bar, made a big gesture of putting the two dimes down; they might have been a fortune in chips and Mule with his Turk mustaches, a croupier. I thought of the warm Riviera, where I'd never been. I pinched Elsa Dumont's blue-white arm and shouted, "Ale, inkeeper, Schlitz-Weiss, 1957, and ask the mademoiselle her pleasure." Elsa nodded and shrugged and gave me a little rotten smile and rearranged her soggy furpiece to keep her neck dry. She rooted in her purse for a canary-yellow kleenex. The way she blew her nose, the place seemed to echo.

Mule put down two glasses of beer. Elsa toyed with hers disconsolately. I wondered how I could make mine last an hour. Then, I thought, I'd get back to work. I thought Mule sounded peevish as he reminded me that he had not seen me around in quite a while; I told him that in quite a while I hadn't been around *anywhere*. First he looked apologetic and then glum. "Almost nobody's been around," he admitted. "They won't tell you, but there's a real depression on."

"Why don't you go back to Greece then?" Elsa snapped, taking a good gulp.

With some visible effort, Mule was impassive.

"Things are funny these days," he said.

"Everybody's got colds," Elsa explained.

"I stay in in this kind of weather," I said, and Elsa said I was smart.

"How's the po-tree?" Mule wanted to know, pouring himself a little whiskey and looking knowledgeable.

"Fine. I've just finished a good one. Last month I couldn't do a thing. I thought I'd have to start punching a clock again." When I left my room I thought the poem *was* good. Now I wasn't sure. I started to feel cold again.

"You were smart to stay in," said Elsa. She sipped and sniffed. "This cold I had was such a lousy thing I wanted to die. I hate March anyway. I've always hated it. When I was a kid I hated it so much I used to fake I was sick so I didn't have to go to school. I faked so much I didn't know if I was sick or not. I hate wind. It gives me the headache."

Mule downed another small whiskey and said, "You should of taken a whole glass of gin and two aspirins and . . ."

"Cripes, save the jokes for someone that feels like laughing, will ya?" She turned to me and gave me a big-sister grin and said, "I'm glad your pomes is coming along good. I love the one you gave me. I don't honestly understand it, but it sounds fine."

I thought of telling her that my poems didn't always please me of late.

Mule polished up a glass and sulked. He could scarcely wait for us to drink up so he could prove to Elsa that he wasn't a piker. I finished mine and felt a little warmer, although there's not too much heat in Mule's. I was glad the jukebox crowd had stayed away. The windows were beginning to smoke up and I could see that a clean layer of snow had quickly muted the street.

"Maybe I oughta get a teevee," Mule said, as if to himself.

"High time," said Elsa.

Mule felt terrible about Elsa Dumont, as everyone knew. It was a source of perpetual heart-shriveling mortification to him that she preferred calling herself a waitress to accepting his bona fide offers. Her reasons for turning him down were various but each was calculated to sting him to the soul. The last time he proposed she had wept and said it was the last humiliation to be proposed to by a fat old Greek who looked like a sick Japanese wrestler. His big blackberry eyes filled up too. I had to get out of the place. Now he stood helpless, watching her blow her raw nose in contempt.

Suddenly, a fearsome wind blew as if to tear the street from the bowels of the city, and hail like mibs, big as dimes, made halloween sounds on the window. I thought it would break. The lights went off and on and then off again. In the dark we sat for several minutes without talking, except for Elsa who now and then went, "Holy Toledo," and sighed. When the lights went on again, Mule poured a big shot on the house. Elsa pretended the shock of surprise was making her faint. We drank and then Elsa said she thought she would get home before it got worse. I thought I would too. But then the lights went off again and stayed off. "I hate to go home this time of year," she said.

"If you'd listen once to me and give me a break," said Mule, "you'd never have to."

"Jeez," she groaned, "I wish I could just conk off some night and never wake up."

"Don't talk that way," Mule commanded. "It's only the time of year, with the cold and all. When it's warmer, you'll feel better."

"Ah, wadda you know?"

I told Mule that if he would give us another on the house I'd tell him about my athletic prowess as a kid. He didn't say he thought this was fair exchange but Elsa glared at him and he set them up. They both listened.

"My parents took me to a strange town when I was about thirteen. We were poor as ragpickers and I was lonesome. It was a mean, tawdry town and the only place my father could get work. Poverty

was new to me and I complained that we were living in a dump and eating dandelion greens for lunch. My father always came home dispirited and my mother looked a hundred. I crabbed all the time about the lousy lunches until my mother couldn't take it any more. She chased me around the table, one day, until she caught me. My father just sat with his face in his hands. She was crying and sobbing and out of breath. She kept gasping, 'You lousy kid. You lousy kid.' I don't know if I felt I was really a bad one or not, but I knew that I had no right to allow her to run like that. So I stopped and let her beat hell out of me. I just stood still and let her slap and punch me until she was all slapped and punched out. It hurt but I didn't cry until it was all over with, when I was alone outside, on my way to school. I hated that school. I was so damned lonesome there. I was far from a dummy, but in that school I couldn't write my name because all the kids were strangers and I was so damned lonesome. I couldn't understand a thing I read. I was the class goof. The teachers ragged me half to death and the kids laughed their heads off. Then, I was short and skinny. Only my legs were long. The girls despised me and the boys pushed my face in the drinking fountain. I used to be afraid to go to the can and held in till I thought I would bust. I went out for the football team and coach wanted to know if I was kidding, so I went out for the cross country team, which had only a faculty advisor and virtually no equipment, but no one cared; they figured no kid in his right mind would run six miles a day. They were half right, at least. There were five of us who got out of our clothes, every school day, warm or cold, rain or shine, in sickness and in health, from September to January, into purple and red underwear suits and low sneakers, and ran. We were freaks every one. We didn't fit anywhere. We hardly knew each other's names. All we had in common is that we told ourselves we liked running through the wet, cold streets. We liked to fly, to stretch our legs. On the football team everyone was the other guy's buddy. They would slap each other on the back and yell, 'Way to go, baby-boy.' We opened our mouths only to let the breath squeak in our puny chests, while the kids on the sidewalks yelled, 'Sucker! Sucker!'

"This one cold day was in November. It was cold enough to break the flagpoles, when only a mad boy would take off his clothes and run in the streets. The only creatures out were the dogs that gnawed our calves. Housewives stared at us from behind livingroom curtains and shook their heads. In our get-up we must have looked like a small convention of surprised lovers.

"Five started off on a time trial but soon I was alone. I don't know

if they passed me or if I passed them, but by the time I covered the two city miles and got out into the country, to the foot of the hill, I didn't see a soul.

"All around me trees stood like skeletons, bent by the wind, refusing to get back in their graves. My ears itched at the edges. The brown dirt below me was hard as a cellar floor, and right up to my eyes I could feel the pain in my chest with every thrust of my hips.

"It was time for me to get my second wind; it always came at the foot of the hill; but this day it didn't come.

"I had to slow up and I could feel the soles of my feet slide a little. The wind was in my face now and I leaned as far forward as I could, resting on it, as if I expected it to hold me up. All the while it got darker and colder. My mouth was woolen and my skin pinched. I think a boy can be unconscious on his feet, because when I found myself on the top, I couldn't remember how I got there.

"The top of the hill was far and away the emptiest place in the world. I stood there weaving and freezing, too stiff to shiver. What I did you couldn't call jogging; I was simply moving my legs without getting anywhere, while the wind cut them; it seemed to me that I went through this ritual for ten minutes but I was still at the top of the hill.

"Around me I couldn't see any houses or farms, because there weren't any; I could see only the rock-ridden, stumpy boondocks, spotted blue and yellow with my own fever. Below, the city was another world. At that moment, as bad as things were, I knew that I had a choice; even if I were shivering with fear: I knew that I could stay there and freeze to death—my body pleaded to be allowed to collapse and die—or I could summon a little bit of insanity and keep going. As I stumbled along, more fallen than running, I grabbed a stiff switch-weed, roots and all, and still moving forward and down, I whipped myself across the legs until I couldn't bear it; all the while I yelled, 'You lousy kid. You lousy kid.' Back at the gym I fainted. I stayed in bed a month. I had scarlet fever. My mother took good care of me."

Elsa said, "Jeez, it must have been tough on the old lady."

"She got it too. She died of it."

"What about your old man?" asked Mule.

"He may have forgiven me by now, but I doubt it."

Elsa grabbed me and held my face to her neck. The fur tickled my nose. "It's O.K., lovey," she said. "You'll write lots of good pomes."

Mule said, "Elsa, you and me . . ."

SYLVIA PLATH:

Recantation

"Tea leaves I've given up
And that crooked line
On the queen's palm
Is no more my concern.
On my black pilgrimage
This moon-pocked crystal ball
Will break before it help;
Rather than croak out
What's to come,
My darling ravens are flown.

"Forswear those freezing tricks of sight
And all else I've taught
Against the flower in the blood:
Not wealth nor wisdom stands
Above the simple vein,
The straight mouth.
Go to your greenhorn youth
Before time ends
And do good
With your white hands."

Tinker Jack and the Tidy Wives

"Come lady, bring that pot
Gone black of polish
And whatever pan this mending master
Should trim back to shape;
I'll correct each mar
On silver dish,
And shine that kettle of copper
At your fireside
Bright as blood.

"Come lady, bring that face
Fallen from luster;
Time's soot in bleared eye
Can be made to glister
For small charge.
No form's gone so awry,
Crook-back or bandy-leg,
But Tinker Jack can forge
Beauty from hag.

"Whatever scath
Fierce fire's wrought
Jack will touch up
And fit for use.
What scar's been knocked
Into cracked heart
Jack shall repair.

"And if there be
Young wives still blithe,
Still fair,
Whose labor's not yet smoked
Their fine skin sere,
From their white heat
Before he part
Let Jack catch fire."

CONSTANCE URDANG:

Grand Tour

Clouds fly like bannerets at earth's round rim
Toward which wave pushes. Tourist (lucky him,
Cabined on A deck) through a spyglass sees
O, islands, harbors, coastline, bays indented
On continent ahead he has invented.

He holding up that blue umbrella, sky,
Like an ungainly souvenir of home,
Gains ground, marks miles, snaps stills of foreign places,
Still never fathoms faces (are his own);
For postcard-fancier pictures what he pleases.

Tor, cavern, turret draw like magnet
Attentive tourist on narcotic drugget;
All architecture is ancestral home.
Where's tourist house or haven? Risky riddle!
Travel, travail began in pitching cradle.

The Ambiguous Heart

It is possible to live
Anywhere. The place does not matter;
Imaginary Africas inflame
The coffee-drinker's fever to be gone,
To be the Other. Thus "the idea of death
Saves him," and thus the real, insipid brew
Frees powerful aromas.
If he knew
Substantial Africa, to drink its breath,
Merge with its substance till the two were one,
His thirst would be the same;
Thus once in Paris, suburb of desire,
His wilful heart persisted in despair
And lusted after Paris, being there.

Narcissus

His infant squalls were clamorous with rage,
His hunger never satisfied. They thought
He would outgrow his tantrums, act his age.
Prodigal uncles, reaping the jackknife crop,
Found him the difficult one, who would not be bought
On easy terms, with all his life to pay.
His sisters chalked their visions on the walk
In candy colors; rain washed them away.
He taught himself to skate on the black ice
That choked the river and the nervous waters;
Once at the crossroads of the solstices
He saw Cold crouched, a trap about to spring.
There in the silent center of the world
He caught the black month huddled under snow,
And thought the roads led nowhere. Then one day
The river faced his face accusingly
So that he shook, for suddenly he saw
Himself, an old man without any daughters.

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GEORGE SEFERIS, head of the Political Division of the Foreign Ministry of Greece, is one of his nation's foremost poets. Edmund Keeley's translations of and commentary on Seferis appeared in ACCENT for Summer 1956.

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CONSTANCE URDANG has returned to Iowa City after a year in Mexico with her husband, the poet Donald Finkel. She is working on translations of the poetry of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a 17th-century Mexican nun.

EDWARD GREENFIELD SCHWARTZ:

The Novels of Nathanael West

The Complete Works of Nathanael West. Farrar, Straus & Cudahy.

Nathanael West was one of those writers whose work brings upon its author considerable personal abuse.* Not long before his death in 1940 (at the age of thirty-eight, he complained to F. Scott Fitzgerald that most of the reviews of *The Day of the Locust* were "brutal personal attacks." These attacks probably should have been expected by one who, as associate editor (with George Grosz) of the satirical monthly *Americana,* subscribed with venomous delight to the proclamation: "We are Americans who believe that our civilization exudes a miasmic stench and that we had better prepare to give it a rapid and decent burial. We are the laughing morticians of the present."

The "miasmic stench" that West perceived had less to do with the externals of life than with the inexorability of human nature. In his early work, West's principal images are man smelling his own excrement and man striving to fornicate in a world—to borrow a critical cliché—hostile or at best indifferent to man's needs. Such images could hardly be expected to charm any liberated audience, much less readers of the protest novels of the thirties. Lacking dogma, hope, and idealism, West's novels seemed anachronistic in a decade dominated by proletarian fiction. While West considered himself on the side of "the radical press," they didn't like his "particular brand of joking" and thought it "even Fascist sometimes," he complained to George Milburn.

Perhaps West's proletarian critics had been disturbed by the considerable influence exerted upon him by the ideas and imagery of T. S. Eliot. At any rate, I think that, besides the obscenity and pessimism of West's novels, his non-Marxist critics may have felt vaguely embarrassed by his self-abasement, which seems at times to border on an almost virulent anti-Semitism.

Born Nathan Weinstein, the son of a bourgeois New York family, he anglicized his name, he told William Carlos Williams, because "Horace Greeley said, 'Go west young man.' So I did." Going "West" may have meant striking out for new spiritual horizons; it certainly meant simulating the dress and manner of a world quite different from his father's for the reward of acceptance in a valued high-class literary society. He was congenial, enjoyed being "a great guy" (Mr. Williams' phrase in his *Autobiography*), and didn't in the least feel himself compromised by the need to be a poseur to gain admittance to the society he admired. With typical good humor and pride, he wrote in an autobiographical story called "The Fake" (later changed to "L'Affaire Beano")

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* There have been, of course, many appreciative articles on West. Among the best are: Richard Gehman, "Introduction," *The Day of the Locust* (New York: New Directions, 1950); James F. Light, *"Miss Lonelyhearts*: The Imagery of Nightmare," *American Quarterly,* VIII (Winter, 1956), 316-327; Norman Podhoretz, "A Particular Kind of Joking, " *New Yorker,* XXXIII (May 18, 1957), 156-166. Also of interest is "The Individuality of Nathanael West," *Western Review,* XX (Autumn, 1955), 7-27, —a plagiarism of the Columbia University M. A. thesis of Herman H. Levart and of several published essays on West.

about his social success while an expatriate writer in Paris in 1925 and 1926:

> When I got to Montparnasse, all the obvious roles had either been dropped or were being played by experts. But I made a lucky hit. Instead of trying for strangeness, I formalized and exaggerated the costume of a bond salesman. I wore carefully pressed Brooks Brothers clothing, sober but rich ties, and carried gloves and a tightly-rolled umbrella. My manners were elaborate and I professed great horror at the slightest breach of the conventional. It was a success. I was asked to all the parties.

Meager as this sketch of West's early manhood is, I think it has some slight value because both West the Jew and West the poseur figure in his semi-autobiographical fantasy, *The Adventures of Balso Snell* (1931). A brilliant first novel, *Balso Snell* has stumped the critics, who have misunderstood West's statement to A. J. Liebling that it had been written "as a protest against writing books." Such protests were still the fashion, and, for the time being, West didn't mind keeping company with the zany Dadaists (though by 1933 he bitterly resented being identified with them or even with the more respectable Surrealists).

One of the most profane, bawdy, humorous novels in American literature, *Balso Snell* records West's Rabelaisian probing of his own agitated mind for answers to the eternal riddles: What is man? What is reality? What is truth, beauty, love? I read the novel as a strangely detached self-study: it's as though West were two persons, one acting inside the dream, the other observing himself from the outside. West demands of himself that he look at reality as it is, not as convention would have him see it. With savage humor and irony, he despoils the frustrated artist of his self-deluding poses and, like a Karl Marx of the human emotions, exposes the "real" motive of the artist—the desire for sexual satisfaction. His most important discovery during his dream journey is that man's pretensions, his romantic conception of himself, lead to the abnegation of basic human needs and to tragic frustrations. Since our pretensions stem from the false gods of religion, art, and civilization, the novel may be considered "as a protest against writing books." (Actually, West's protest is different from the Dadaists'; they were reacting against the meaningless world of reason, the inhuman world of science and the machine.)

Because *Balso Snell* has puzzled so many of its few readers and because West's temperament so clearly emerges in it, an attempt at a detailed analysis of this episodic, disjointed fantasy may be worth while. Balso begins his dream journey by entering the Trojan Horse (that is, himself, his own self-betraying mind, the receptacle of the cunning, deceitful culture symbolized by the Horse) through the "Anus Mirabilis," for what he will find within is the disgusting animalistic soul of man. On the threshold of his grand quest, Balso (like the hero-poets of the past) prays to the Gods: "O Beer! O Meyerbeer! O Bach! O Offenbach! Stand me now as ever in good stead." West's irreverent burlesque of James Joyce's dedicated hero-artist, Stephen Dedalus (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), stridently announces his refusal to take seriously the artist's priestly functions. Later, when we realize that Balso's journey is nothing more than a wet dream, we understand that West's mockery of the artist is just one aspect of his misanthropy.

Entering "the gloom of the foyer-like intestine," Balso begins to feel depressed by its silence and emptiness. He sings to keep his spirits high. His song has to do with "roundness," an obvious sexual image, for what he seeks is the wholeness that is to be achieved by sexual union. The song's progression from the roundness of "the Anus of a Bronze Horse" to higher forms, the roundness of the wheels of the Lord's chariot or the roundness of art ("Giotto Painter of Perfect Circles") or the roundness of "the Dew-Loaded Navel" of the Virgin Mary, blasphemously and humorously suggests that Balso may be seeking philosophical wholeness, too, some kind of mystical idealism to resolve the conflicts and confusions of his daily living. (I don't think Balso's search for spiritual unity can be taken too seriously. A recent graduate in philosophy at Brown University, West parades his learning a little too gaudily and sophomorically in this novel for my taste.)

But Balso's skepticism is indicated by the names he gives his song: "Anywhere Out of the World, or a Voyage Through the Hole in the Mundane Millstone . . ., or Toe Holes for a Flight of Fancy." Unsettled by his own self-consuming wit, he thinks of "the Phoenix Excrementi, a race of men he had invented one Sunday afternoon while in bed," a race that "eat themselves, digest themselves, and give birth to themselves by evacuating their bowels." Within his own bowels—West's way of identifying man's unconscious as well as what we like to call the collective unconscious of mankind—Balso's adventure for sexual fulfillment and philosophic certainty are equated with ironic effect.

Dream logic at this point requires a splitting up because Balso's desire for the wholeness, the oneness of idealism has been shattered. His mind conjures up a guide to the marvels of the Trojan Horse. Personifying the impulse within Balso's mind toward idealism, the guide tells Balso a marvelous story about how a "traveler in Tyana, who was looking for the sage Apollonius, saw a snake enter the lower part" of the sage's body. This peculiarity of "the philosopher-saint" appeals to Balso, who admires the sexual-spiritual perfection symbolized. But the guide's idealism soon bores Balso.

Coming suddenly upon "a place where the intestine had burst through the stomach wall," Balso cries out, "'What a hernia! What a hernia!'" This enrages the idealistic guide, who sees not a hernia but a beautiful art object. (Earlier what the guide had seen as 'a beautiful Doric prostate gland" the realistic Balso had called "simply an atrophied pile.") Trying to pacify the guide, Balso blunders further: "'Hernia! What a beautiful name for a girl! Hernia Hornstein! Paresis Pearlberg! Paranoia Puntz!'" Unexpectedly pained, the guide cries "in an enormous voice, 'I am a Jew! and whenever anything Jewish is mentioned, I find it necessary to say that I am a Jew. I'm a Jew! A Jew!'" The guide's Jewishness is like the hernia and the atrophied pile, a disgusting reality he would shun, so that his fanatic idealism seems to be little more than an escape.

Such an interpretation suggests to me that the unflattering gallery of Jews in West's novels may have been his peculiar way of facing with scrupulous honesty what he saw as an unpleasant reality. Perhaps he had the sophistication to consider the Jewish obsession with its historical guilt a romantic falsification. At any rate, I am inclined to the view that his Jewishness contributes to his self-mocking temperament.

Realizing that he and the guide represent opposite views of human life, Balso humors the guide by contemplating Picasso's idealistic proposition, "there are no feet in nature." This return to the contemplation of the ideal connects the search for roundness in art with Balso's sexual and philosophical quests. Fleeing from the fetid idealism of art, Balso's next encounter is with himself in the guise of a flagellating mystic, Maloney the Areopagite, who appears "naked except for a derby in which thorns were sticking." Tortured by guilt and fear, Maloney is "attempting to crucify himself with thumb tacks." When he isn't abusing himself, he works on a biography of St. Puce, "a flea who was born, lived, and died, beneath the arm of our Lord." Reduced to this absurd physical image (a favorite device of West), the religious myth has no appeal to Balso, who finds it slightly morbid.

Having rejected the idealism of art and religion, cornerstones of western civilization, Balso now seeks a new view of mankind. He finds it, comically, in the English composition of a twelve-year-old prodigy named John Gilson. Like Balso, Gilson is searching for "the Real," but, though he willingly smells his own excrement, he cannot discover his true self. Sexually frustrated, Gilson assumes a mask before the world. Sometimes he assumes the role of the guilt-haunted murderer Raskolnikov, sometimes of the calculating deceiver Iago; he never could be "plain John Gilson—honest, honest Iago, yes, but never honest John." Gilson's pretense, like Iago's, is to a simple, honest nature, while actually he is constantly scheming. (I am reminded of West's tale of how he made "a lucky hit" among the expatriates in Paris.)

Wearing his Raskolnikov mask, Gilson keeps a crime journal which he calls "The Making of a Fiend." In it he tells a grotesque tale of murder committed for "literary reasons," to discover "the horrors" of such an act. Symbolically, his action is a repudiation of reason—the reason of society (the policeman) and of science (Darwin). His "reason" is that of the unconscious; it has to do with his sexual drives. Consequently, the culmination of the murder (itself a sexual act) leads to his discovery of his homosexual self and to a sexual climax. Reality, then, includes this nasty mixture of irrational guilt and desire, discovered in Balso's own consciousness, though protectively removed from his sense of responsibility by being attributed to Gilson.

That Balso's search for reality takes him through the disgusting mire of man's animality is inevitable because West believed that man is a comic victim of his own flesh, a subservient clown performing at the whim of an unseen master named Instinct. West has Gilson admit: "I need women and because I can't buy them or force them, I have to make poems for them." "All my acting has but one purpose, the attraction of the female." These confessions would seem to be West's as well as Gilson's. Humorously stated, the confessions are nevertheless at the root of West's bitterness. Not endowed with physical beauty, West (like Gilson) had to prove himself worthy of his love by revealing his innermost beauty (*i.e.*, he wore "his heart and genitals" around his neck).

What Gilson resents is the burden of responsibility. After all, he can't help himself; his personality is split by his fleshly needs and his idealizing soul. Even worse, he isn't really a free agent, but is controlled like a machine ("an automobile") by an unrelenting force within him:

> "When you think of me, Saniette," [Gilson tells his mistress in a scene that burlesques Marcel Proust] "think of two men—myself and the chauffeur within me. This chauffeur is very large and dressed in ugly ready-made clothing. His shoes, soiled from walking about the streets of a great city, are covered with animal ordure and chewing gum . . .
>
> "The name of this chauffeur is The Desire to Procreate.
>
> "He sits within me like a man in an automobile. His heels are in my bowels, his knees on my heart, his face in my brain . . .
>
> "From within, he governs the sensations I receive through my fingers, eyes, tongue, and ears."

Like all other men, the artist is governed by "the chauffeur within"; the artist's pose is like the pose of other men, motivated by similar desires. His artistic creations and intellectual accomplishments are thus seen as emanating not from his spiritualism or altruism but from his id.

Deprived of the illusions of art and culture, Balso seeks beauty. Stimulated, his mind brings forth a naked, slim young girl "busily washing her hidden charms in a public fountain." The impassioned Balso throws his arms around her only to discover that his search for roundness is not yet to be consummated, even on the sexual level. In the middle of a kiss, he suddenly feels himself "embracing tweed," discovers in his arms another potential writer, "a middle-aged woman dressed in a mannish suit and wearing horn-rimmed glasses." Disillusioned, Balso comes to realize that the inhabitants of the Trojan Horse are "writers in search of an audience," *i.e.,* merely aspects of himself in search of a woman, his favorite audience.

The remainder of the novel, a brilliant *tour de force,* provides confirmation of Balso's discovery of man's real nature, his backside personality. The dream logic takes him in waves toward the final climax, the release his body craves, even at the expense of spiritual confusion. West creates a dream-within-a-dream, two hypothetical versions of a bathetic modern love affair, an amusing parody of Joyce, and, as a final ironic twist, a long seduction speech in which Balso, just as he is about to take his pleasure, tries to rationalize the justness of the act. Balso's speech is a grotesquely realistic parody of the familiar language of the smart set West knew so well in New York and Paris. Balso recites all the time-worn justifications for illicit pleasure—the Time-argument, the political, philosophical, and aesthetic reasons.

Although West's style and ideas are refined in his later novels, his outlook and method do not, in my opinion, undergo any fundamental changes. For West, the old gods are dead; no miraculous loves or births occur among men any more: at our slightly ridiculous births, "instead of the Three Kings, the Dove, the Star of Bethlehem, there was only old Doctor Haasenschweitz who wore rubber gloves and carried a towel over his arm like a waiter." Yet we destroy ourselves by holding up an idealized image of mankind that can never be. We indulge in a "terrible competition" that demands our "being more than animals." Our idealized notion of ourselves derives from our worshiping false gods, cultural as well as religious. West's antidote for this corrupting poison would seem to be his scoffing, humorous vernacular style and his hard, derisive,

realistic look at the world without the illusive veil of religion, culture, or art.

Other visions than cynical hedonism are tried out in West's second novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), a story about a young newspaperman who writes a lonely hearts column. A modern Everyman, the anonymous reporter who writes under the Miss Lonelyhearts by-line becomes obsessed by the impossibility of alleviating the terrifying misery and suffering of the grotesques who seek his advice: Sick-of-it-all, a Catholic woman who has had seven children and can't stand the pain and fear of her eighth pregnancy; Desperate, a girl who was born without a nose and who out of loneliness and despair contemplates suicide; Harold S., a fifteen-year-old boy whose deaf-mute sister has been raped; Faye Doyle, a lusty woman married to an inadequate cripple; Broad Shoulders, a deserted wife who wants a home for herself and her children. Sickened by his heightened awareness of the griefs of mortality, Miss Lonelyhearts (like the cripple Peter Doyle) becomes desperate to know "what is the whole stinking business for."

This is essentially the same question raised in *Balso Snell.* Because it cannot be answered, Shrike, Miss Lonelyhearts' cynical boss and foil, ironically suggests various escapes. But Shrike knows that "neither the soil, nor the South Seas, nor Hedonism, nor art, nor suicide, nor drugs, can mean anything to us . . . God alone is our escape. The church is our only hope, the First Church of Christ Dentist, where He is worshiped as Preventer of Decay." Parodying the unhappy letters of the lovelorn, Shrike humorously dictates a letter to the "Miss Lonelyhearts of Miss Lonelyhearts" (*i.e.,* to Christ):

> I am twenty-six years old and in the newspaper game. Life for me is a desert empty of comfort. I cannot find pleasure in food, drink, or women—nor do the arts give me joy any longer. The Leopard of Discontent walks the streets of my city; the Lion of Discouragement crouches outside the walls of my citadel. All is desolation and a vexation of the spirit. I feel like hell. How can I believe, how can I have faith in this day and age? Is it true that the greatest scientists believe again in you?
>
> I read your column and like it very much. There you once wrote: 'When the salt has lost its savour, who shall savour it again?' Is the answer: 'None but the Saviour?'
>
> Thanking you very much for a quick reply, I remain yours truly,
>
> A Regular Subscriber

Obviously, Shrike doesn't have much hope for "a quick reply." Nor does West. The failure of religion as an acceptable answer is painfully (though almost humorously) illustrated by Miss Lonelyhearts' violent death, which occurs just when he fancies himself bringing Christ's love into the life of a lovelorn cripple, his murderer Peter Doyle.

The theme of man in search of salvation, of a way of life, the flat, over-simplified characterizations, the uncanny, nightmarish atmosphere, and the allegorical style of *Miss Lonelyhearts* remind me of *The Pilgrim's Progress.* But what a difference there is between West's world and Bunyan's. Miss Lonelyhearts' progress toward an acceptance of Christ parallels Christian's, but

with one tragic difference. Unlike Christian, who awakens from his dream refreshed, Miss Lonelyhearts never emerges from his dream. Deeply engrossed by his Christ-dream, he goes to a monstrously ironic death that is described with complete objectivity. His self-deception is exposed by the event, and his dream, shattered.

I don't think West's pessimism underwent any change in *Miss Lonelyhearts.* If anything, it deepened. Evidently, West had come to believe that man's dreams couldn't work in the modern world even as opiates: "Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio, and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst." Bad enough that our dreams can't come true, but to have our false dreams reduced to childishness is even worse. West laments this betrayal not because it deprives man of an essential dignity, nobility, and idealism, nor because it attenuates his tragic strivings, but because it deprives man of a comfortable escape that can withstand the assaults of the rationalist. This is the essence of his temperament; this is what makes the quality of his pessimism so different from that of Conrad or Hemingway or K. A. Porter or Faulkner.

In his last two novels, *A Cool Million* (1934) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939), West considers the political, social, and psychological significance of "the worst betrayal," the reduction of man's dreams to immature banalities. Although *A Cool Million* is a rather funny burlesque of the Horatio Alger theme, it isn't up to West's best work. Subtitled "The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin," it is a picaresque tale about a strong, spirited, red-blooded American boy who loses his teeth, one eye, one leg, his scalp, and eventually his life in pursuit of the American success dream. Evidently, West intended to show how banal myths, supported by emotional jargon and clichés, could make unthinking simpletons like Lemuel a tool of fascistic demagogues. Written hurriedly to meet a publisher's deadline, *A Cool Million* reads like a very good outline for what might have been an excellent American version of Voltaire's *Candide.*

Four years after publication of *A Cool Million,* West completed his last and finest novel, *The Day of the Locust.* Luck—the purchase of *Miss Lonelyhearts* by 20th Century Fox, which so altered the story that when it appeared as *Advice to the Lovelorn* it was unrecognizable, merely a silly cops-and-robbers movie—luck had taken West to Hollywood, the fabled land of dreamers and dream-makers. To one already deeply affected by how the frustration of man's impossible dreams led to emotional starvation, bitterness, and readiness for vengeful violence, Horace Greeley's dictum must have seemed sound; Hollywood was the golden land. It provided West with material for the most complete statement of his major theme. Unchanged is his abiding pessimism, but his pictorial method has undergone development and clarification. That method had been labeled "surrealistic" by Clifton Fadiman. And, though West protested that Fadiman "knows enough about Surrealism, I am sure, to know that I am not a Surrealist at all," later critics, following Fadiman's lead, have vaguely identified West with the surrealist movement.

While certain aspects of West's novels resemble surrealistic paintings, his attitude toward the materials of his art differs considerably, in my opinion, from the surrealists'. Like the surrealists, West was aware of the violence,

dissonance, and pain of life; like some of the surrealists, he was a Freudian who sought reality in man's irrational dream world. But, unlike the surrealists (and the dadaists), West had no program. His pessimism didn't lead to nihilism or to an intense hatred of the rational world. On the contrary, his pose is that of the objective observer who merely records the horror.

He seems more akin to Albert Camus than to the surrealists. Part of Camus' *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* could easily be applied to *The Day of the Locust*:

> Ce divorce entre l'homme et sa vie, l'acteur et son décor, c'est proprement le sentiment de l'absurdeté.
>
> • • •
>
> . . . l'homme se trouve devant l'irrationnel. Il sent en lui son désir de bonheur et de raison. L'absurde nait de cette confrontation entre l'appel humain et le silence déraisonnable du monde.

Like Camus, West seems to doubt the possibility of philosophical explanations in a world of "the absurd," the incoherent, the senseless. The job of the writer is to achieve a lucid portrayal of the anguished human consciousness journeying to the end of night without meaning or hope.

That is the task Tod Hackett, the artist-hero of *The Day of the Locust,* sets for himself in his projected painting "The Burning of Los Angeles." Tod's maturing conception of his painting provides the ideational pattern of the novel, which may be read as West's version of man's fate as well as his view of the function of art. (Through Tod's development, we can see just how unlike the surrealists West is in his attitude toward the subjects of his art.)

Our first glimpse of Tod in the opening scene of the novel is one of West's most brilliant scenes. "Around quitting time, Tod Hackett heard a great din on the road outside his office. The groan of leather mingled with the jangle of iron and over all beat the tattoo of a thousand hooves." Tod hurries to the window and sees "an army of cavalry and foot" passing, hears above the clamor of horses and men "a little fat man" pursuing the retreating army and screaming through a megaphone, "Stage Nine—you bastards—Stage Nine!" Without much ado, West provides us with the ironic situation that is at the very core of his novel: the flat reality ("around quitting time"), the unglamorous act ("Stage Nine—you bastards—Stage Nine") juxtaposed against the marvelous scene of human action on the grand scale as created in a Hollywood film.

Against this strange backdrop of romantic man-made shows, visions of the ideal, Tod observes the everyday life of Hollywood where two kinds of people, "the masqueraders" and "the spectators," enact their roles in an environment that seems almost to parody the romantic movies.

> . . . As he walked along, he examined the evening crowd. A great many of the people wore sports clothes which were not really sports clothes. Their sweaters, knickers, slacks, blue flannel jackets with brass buttons were fancy dress. The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneaks with a bandana around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court.

Scattered among these masquerades were people of a different type. Their clothing was somber and badly cut, bought from mail-order houses. While the others moved rapidly, darting into stores and cocktail bars, they loitered on the corners or stood with their backs to the shop windows and stared at everyone who passed. When their stare was returned, their eyes filled with hatred.

• • •

He reached the end of Vine Street and began the climb into Pinyon Canyon. Night had started to fall.

The edges of the trees burned with a pale violet light and their centers gradually turned from deep purple to black. The same violet piping, like a Neon tube, outlined the tops of the ugly, hump-backed hills and they were almost beautiful.

But not even the soft wash of dusk could help the houses. Only dynamite would be of any use against the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles that lined the slopes of the canyon.

• • •

On the corner of La Huerta Road was a miniature Rhine castle with tarpaper turrets pierced for archers. Next to it was a little highly colored shack with domes and minarets out of the *Arabian Nights*. Again he was charitable. Both houses were comic, but he didn't laugh. Their desire to startle was so eager and guileless.

It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous.

What Tod feels is essentially the same as what the Easterners feel in Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel," when, travelling through the great Nebraska prairies, they are "overcome at the sight" of the garish blue hotel and express "shame, pity, and horror, in a laugh." Shame for man's vermin-like pollution of the natural world; pity for feeble mankind entrapped on "a whirling, fire-smitten, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb"; horror for man's dreadful fate. Embarrassed by the grotesque and the outlandish, the Easterners express their feelings "in a laugh." West's Easterner, Tod, feels shame, pity, and horror, too, but, because he is an artist, he feels no embarrassment, just a desire to understand, to capture the essence of the scene in a great work of art.

One purpose of this digression is to suggest that West is not an isolated figure in American literary history. Although in "Some Notes on Miss Lonelyhearts" he expressed his dislike for the naturalistic, documentary novels of Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser, he shares some of the attitudes of the naturalists, particularly Stephen Crane's horror and sadness at the sight of "the truly monstrous."

About the gaping loiterers, Tod Hackett later discovers that "All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters,

on the fields, and at tedious machines of all sorts, saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs when they had enough." When their dreams become a reality, they go to California, "the land of sunshine and oranges." But, once there, "they discover sunshine isn't enough." They don't know what to do with their leisure. "Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they've been tricked and burn with resentment . . . Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed."

Disillusioned with their dreams, the loiterers become the audience of the masqueraders, whose clothing symbolizes their self-deception, their present participation and enactment of the romantic dreams that, ironically, give them life. Among these masqueraders are a special group whom Tod thinks of as "The Dancers": Abe Kusich, a contentious dwarf who wants all the pleasures of the tough, masculine world; Faye Greener, an ambitious, incredibly inept actress whose beauty the infatuated, pursuing Tod thinks of as "structural like a tree's, not a quality of her mind or heart"; her father, Harry, an old vaudeville ham who has been reduced to peddling "Miracle Solvent, the modern polish par excellence, . . . used by all the movie stars"; Earle Shoop, an ignorant small-town Arizona cowboy who stiffly plays the role of the strong, silent type he's seen at the movies; Claude Estee, a successful screen writer who lives "in a big house that was the exact reproduction of the old Dupuy Mansion near Biloxi, Mississippi," and tries to do an "impersonation that went with the Southern Colonial mansion"; Adore Loomis, an obnoxious child prodigy who is being primed by his mother for a movie career.

In a series of Tod's lithographs, these dancers are driven by the stares of their audience "to spin crazily and leap into the air with twisted backs like hooked trout." And this is how they appear in the novel: "hooked" by their separate dreams, they become capering manikins indulging in extraordinary antics. West's idea reminds me of Sherwood Anderson's conception of "the grotesque." In *Winesburg, Ohio,* Anderson tells how

> . . . when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself . . . All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful . . . And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths . . . It was the truths that made the people grotesques . . . The moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.

What Anderson calls "truths" West calls "dreams." Like Anderson's grotesques, West's characters come alive when they give themselves up to a "truth."

The characters in *The Day of the Locust* are either lifeless onlookers no longer capable of dreaming, spectators waiting for the moment when they can wreak their vengeance, or dancers who are animated by an impossible desire to live a dream-role, to achieve the beauty of an ideal. Only by accepting a dream can one become a participant in the dance of life. So it had been,

ironically, for Homer Simpson, a quiet midwesterner who looked "like one of Picasso's great sterile athletes [brooding] hopelessly on pink sand, staring at veined marble waves." After meeting Faye, he is hooked by the dream of love. Ironically, by coming alive Homer is "destroying himself." His dream of love makes him susceptible to Faye's sadism and infidelity, and culminates in the insane attack upon the annoying child prodigy which leads to his own violent end. Life, for West, is destructive: when a man begins to enact a dream, he inevitably destroys himself; when the cheated spectators merge in a mob and for a brief moment "come alive," they achieve their aliveness through violence.

To illuminate this bizarre, sordid Hollywood dream world in his painting, Tod had studied the methods "not only of Goya and Daumier but also of certain Italian artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, . . . the painters of Decay and Mystery." After watching the worshippers

> . . . writhe on the hard seats of their churches, he thought of how well Alessandro Magnasco would dramatize the contrast between their drained-out feeble bodies and their wild, disordered minds. He would not satirize them as Hogarth or Daumier might, nor would he pity them. He would paint their fury with respect, appreciating its awful, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization.

And this is the attitude and method of West in *The Day of the Locust,* for Magnasco, not surrealism, was the decisive influence on West's style. Like his artist-hero Tod Hackett, West evidently was impressed by Magnasco's baroque scenes of desolation. Shrouded in unearthly twilight, Magnasco's canvases are peopled by spectre-haunted, gaunt monks, self-tortured inquisitors, spastic punchinellos, and convulsive gypsies. The forms of his grotesques are distorted, at times even shattered, heightening the effect of the occasional bursts of light that illuminate the pervasive gloom. Even in his most morbid scenes of human anguish, Magnasco has the remarkable ability to perceive the farcical aspects of the scene. So, too, does West have this comic insight, and, though his morbidity and fantasy derive from a world slightly altered since Magnasco's time, West's sparseness and poetic intensity can be considered linguistic equivalents of Magnasco's style.

Magnasco's attitude toward his subject is important to West: no mockery of the human "need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are"; and no pity, since that would be self-pity. I can't agree with Edmund Wilson's opinion (in *Classics and Commercials*) that *The Day of the Locust* "suffers a little from the lack of a center in the community with which it deals." Mr. Wilson's criticism stems from his dissatisfaction with West's conception of Tod Hackett, "a young Yale man who, as an educated and healthy human being, is supposed to provide a normal point of view from which the deformities of Hollywood may be criticized." To West all men are involved in the fantasy; we all of us strive for the fulfillment of impossible dreams. West no more than Tod can control "the chauffeur within." Even more than Homer Simpson, Tod understands what an infatuation with Faye can mean, but he can't help himself; reason moves us less than need, and need is a hungry, roving hyena, often gorged but never sated.

West's acceptance of his own involvement is not in the least self-pity, as W. H. Auden contends (*Griffin*, May, 1957). Like Camus, West sought to illuminate the absurdity of human life for man's enlightenment; he has a touch, however slight, of the meliorist in him. At one point in *The Day of the Locust,* he has Tod question the validity of his artistic conception: maybe he was "exaggerating the importance of the people who come to California to die. Maybe they weren't really desperate enough to set a single city on fire, let alone the whole country." While it doesn't make any difference "because he was an artist, not a prophet" and his work "would not be judged by the accuracy with which it foretold a future event but by its merit as painting," Tod "refused to give up the role of Jeremiah." Not a do-gooder, not given to social or political dogmas, West evidently believed that his work had some social value, some special insight not to be found in proletarian novels or religious tracts. West thought it important for man to know his own nature; within us the real dangers lurk. His probing of the human heart and mind is as compassionate as the Christian compassion of Mr. Auden, even though it is more anxious and anguished.

The real virtue of West is his absolute clear-sightedness, his complete rejection of the conventional, the dogmatic, and the hackneyed. Those unmentionable trivia of daily living that have so much to do with making our lives, as well as the profanity, the vulgarity, the meanness, the perversity, the violence that is an important (if dreadful) part of human living, West describes in his novels. Disgusted or disdainful, we nevertheless must admit the concreteness, the reality of his vision.

Yet, while we may admire West's substantial accomplishments, we need not find him congenial. While reading his novels, I have often been struck by the resemblance between his notion that man's sustaining dream is delusive and destructive and Conrad's concept of dreams as "the destructive element." To me, Conrad's pessimism is deeper, more philosophical, more humane than West's. Although Conrad recognized the terrible incongruity of life—that man's dreams may not be realized, that man's instincts, his nature, impinge upon his dreams, his ambitions, his hopes—he saw that by following the dream man could at least maintain the ideals, the disciplines that make us human. The pursuit of the dream, though futile, could be tragic and beautiful to Conrad. But not to West, whose personal involvement prevented him from achieving the objectivity, the larger view, of Conrad.

Still, West's novels have value in a world as close to George Orwell's *1984* as ours, where expediency, the pragmatist's truth, has come to be accepted sincerely as reality. West's comic insight is a good antidote to our complacency and cant. At the center of his interest in popular culture, violence, the grotesque, and the search for authoritarian faith is his perception that the inability of a prosperous people to avoid boredom, sterility, and frustration can lead to fascism. The recent decline in the United States of the avant-garde has quieted the protest against the press, radio, and movies, which reduce man's dreams to banalities. The few who have attempted to combat our self-flattery and self-delusion we have derisively called egg-heads, ivory-tower-dwellers, bohemians, decadents. Yet as this democracy "settles in the mould of its vulgarity, heavily thickening to empire" (to quote Robinson Jeffers), perhaps we shall need to be reminded of our pretensions and our failures by satirists like Nathanael West.